

Infant Baptism - some Theological Reflections

"Little child, for you Jesus Christ has come, He has fought, He has suffered. For you He entered the shadow of Gethsemane and the horror of Calvary. For you He uttered the cry 'It is finished!' For you He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven and there He intercedes - for you little child even though you do not know it. But in this way the word of the Gospel becomes true. 'We love Him, because He first loved us.'"

These words from the liturgy of the French Reformed Church express so simply and profoundly the doctrine of grace which is at the heart of a Reformed theology of baptism.

In any discussion of baptism, the first question to be asked is not "Who should be baptised - infants or adults or both?" nor "How should it be administered - by sprinkling, pouring or immersion?" nor "May it be repeated?" These are important questions, but they can only be answered when we have first asked. "What is the meaning of baptism? What does it signify?" The important thing is not the sign but the Reality signified. Only when we are clear as to what is signified, can we then seek to answer these further practical questions. That is also important for New Testament exegesis on the subject, which must not be divorced from our understanding of the Person and Work of Christ in the whole witness of the New Testament. We must do "depth exegesis."

A. What is signified in Baptism?

1. It is a sign of the one work of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the fulfilment of his filial purposes "to bring many sons to glory." Why do we baptise in the Triune Name? Not just because of our Lord's missionary command in Matt. 28,19, but because these words enshrine the Good News of grace. The mission of the Church into the world is grounded on the mission of the Son and the Spirit from the Father to bring us to Sonship and communion. Our Lord began his ministry for us in his vicarious baptism in the waters of Jordan when as the Son He received from the Father the baptism of the Spirit for us in our humanity and set his face to the Cross. His own baptism was "Trinitarian."

Karl Barth tells the story of an old lady who once went to the evangelist Kohlbrügge and asked him: "Tell me, sir, when were you converted?" The evangelist, knowing well that she was interested in the details of his Christian experience, replied, "Madam, I was converted nineteen hundred years ago when Jesus Christ died on a cross for my sins and rose again." He was concerned to point away from himself and his own faith to Jesus Christ. The decisive event for him was not primarily anything in his own experience, important as that may be, but that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, buried ..., the third day He rose again from the dead, He ascended into heaven." It was as though he said: "When Christ died long ago for me, I died then, and when Christ rose again for me from the dead in the garden of Joseph of Arimathea, I rose again, when Christ ascended for me into heaven, I ascended in Him, and now my life is hid with Christ in God." That is the true testimony of faith, the inner witness of the Spirit. In the words of the Apostle: "We thus judge that if one died for all, then all died." Christ for us is prior to Christ in us. This is enshrined in the words from the French Reformed liturgy.

Indeed, three answers can be given to the question, "When did I become a Christian?" in the testimony of faith. First, I have been a child of God

from all eternity in the heart of the Father. Secondly, I became a child of God when Christ the Son lived, died and rose again for me long ago. Thirdly, I became a child of God when the Holy of Spirit - the Spirit of adoption - sealed in my faith and experience what had been planned from all eternity in the heart of the Father and what was completed once and for all in Jesus Christ. There are three "moments" but only one act of Salvation, just as we believe there are three Persons in the Trinity, but only one God. We may never divorce any one from the other two. So Jesus commissioned the disciples to preach the Gospel and to baptise "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Of these three "moments", the second is the decisive one of the Gospel of grace. Christus pro nobis is prior to Christus in nobis. "Little child, for you Jesus Christ has come!"

The work of Salvation is from beginning to end the work of God. Baptism is the sign of what the triune God does. God forgives, God cleanses, God regenerates, God adopts, God sends the Spirit of His Son into our hearts whereby we cry "Abba, Father." Our response to this is to say "Amen" in faith - our "passive" recipient response. There is nothing more passive than "dying", "being buried", "being baptised"!

2. It is a sign of the Covenant of Grace in Reformed language. So the Westminster confession calls it a "sign and seal of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God to represent Christ and His benefits." It is a sacrament of the Gospel. "Go and preach the Gospel to every creature" - by word and sign. So St. Augustine called the sacraments "visible preaching." The covenant of grace is not a bilateral covenant which we make with God in 1985 as though God's grace is contingent on our faith and decision! Baptism then would be a seal of my faith and my decision a badge of my conversion! The good news of the Gospel is that God has made a covenant for us in Christ, and sealed it with His blood nineteen hundred years ago. It is a unilateral covenant of grace - a diatheke not a syntheke - but we are summoned through the Spirit to say "Amen" to it in faith, and to participate in "Christ and His benefits". Baptism is an act of faith which sets forth that covenant made for us and our children in Christ so long ago.

3. The act of baptism in water sets forth Christ's Baptism for us. Jesus spoke of His death on the Cross as His Baptisma. "I have a baptism to be baptised with, and what constraint I am under until the ordeal is over" (Luke 12:50). He says to the disciples, "Can you be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?" (Mark 10:38). That is not just a metaphor for suffering! It is the Reality at the heart of the Gospel, signified by the "rite" of baptism. His Baptism for us - His Cross, His stoning death and His resurrection - is what forgives and sanctifies and secures our sonship, and the work of the Holy Spirit is to "seal" that in our hearts, and call us to participate in this in a life of daily dying and rising with Christ. Baptism is the sacrament of cleansing and forgiveness. But it is not water, not the Church, not the minister, not my faith, not my dying and rising which forgives and heals. It is Christ who has done this for us and does this in us by the Spirit. So we are baptised "in the name of Christ" - not our own name - and we are baptised "into" a life of Union with Christ, of "dying and rising with Christ."

So, our baptism sets for the One Baptism of Christ. Ephesians 4:5 speaks of "One Lord, one faith, one baptism ...", and the Nicene Creed says "We believe in ... one baptism for the remission of sins. Whether we are Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Anglican or Roman Catholic we

participate in One Baptism. But the concept of One Baptism is not derived simply from these two statements, but from our understanding of the Gospel. What do we mean by "the One Baptism"? Three things.

(i) Firstly, it means Christ's Baptism for us. Christ commenced His ministry by being baptised by the Spirit in the waters of Jordan into a life of conflict with evil, which would lead to His Baptism in blood on the Cross - not for Himself, but for us. When He sees the people going down into the river to be baptised by John, confessing their sins, submitting to the verdict of guilty (which repentance is), Jesus says to John "Baptise me! I will submit to the verdict of guilty for them!" He identifies Himself with sinners, that He might take their place as their Substitute under the judgement of God. So He marches to the Cross to be baptised for us - to be "circumcised for us" (Col 2, 11ff). The Gospel is the Good News that Christ was baptised in blood on the Cross once for all, One for all, the One on behalf of the many, the many in the One. In this way, His death was our death, His burial, our burial, His Resurrection our resurrection - His Baptism for us, our baptism. If baptism sets forth the love of the Father, it is grounded in the substitution of the Son. (see G.W. Bromiley, The Baptism of Infants)

(ii) Secondly, the One Baptism means Christ's Baptism of us by the Holy Spirit. The Christ who was baptised for us nineteen hundred years ago, now comes to baptise us to make us members of His Body, that we might participate in His Sonship and communion with the Father. John the Baptist said. "I baptised you with water, He shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost...." Pentecost is the act whereby the Christ who was Himself baptised for us by the Holy Spirit in Jordan, who was baptised in blood for us on the Cross to secure our sonship, now baptises the Church by the same Spirit to make it His Body in a corporate baptism - and He still baptises us personally into union with Himself by the Spirit of adoption whereby we too by a shared baptism of the Spirit can cry "Abba, Father."

(iii) Thirdly, the One Baptism means incorporation into Christ The One Christ baptises us by the One Spirit into the One Body that we might participate in all that He has done and is doing for us, that we might receive Him with all His blessings. Christ is the Agent in Baptism, and He baptises us into a life of sonship, of service, of dying and rising with Him in newness of life (Rom.6).

B. What is the Sign?

Water is the visible sign of washing. Ananias says to Paul "Be baptised and wash away your sins ..." (Act 22:16). Paul speaks about "the washing of water by the word (Eph. 5:26), and the writer to the Hebrews speaks about "having our hearts sprinkled ... and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb 10:22). Immersion, sprinkling and pouring as forms of washing are all good biblical symbols for cleansing, where the real cleansing is by the "blood of Christ" and the Spirit. A few brief comments.

- (i) Baptism in water is a sign in the first instance, not of anything in us, but of Christ and the Spirit. It is not my faith which cleanses but Christ by the Spirit - the Christ in whom we believe.
- (ii) It is a seal which marks out the individual personally as someone who belongs to Christ ... to make a visible difference between the Church and the world. "Little child, for you Jesus Christ has come" This is part of the significance of household baptisms in the New Testament and in missionary situations. In baptism we say,

"We and our family belong to Christ ... and have repudiated the world...."

- (111) The water "exhibits" not an absent Christ but a Christ present according to His promise. The Christ who was baptised at Calvary in our place, as our substitute, is present today to baptise by the Holy Spirit, in faithfulness to His promise, "Lo, I am with you" Baptism is a "participatory sign."

C. To whom then should it be administered? The Reformed confessions said "Believers and their children" - generally quoting Acts 2:31. "The promise is to you and your children" But the practice of infant baptism is not based simply on a text like that, which is capable of different interpretations, but on the meaning of the whole Gospel. The covenant of grace, promised to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ, was "for us and our children." Two things are important here. (a) Christ did not die for adults only! He died for adults and children ... "little child, for you ..." (b) God's grace is not conditioned by anything in us, not even by our faith! Nevertheless, baptism must always be an act of faith - in the Christ who died for us and our children. But it is not a sign of our faith, but of the Christ in whom we believe. There is no faith in a little child. But in faith we say ... "... for you little child, even though you do not know it..."

In faith we are doing something for the child, long before the child comes to faith, in acknowledgement of what Christ did for all of us nineteen hundred years before we were born. But in faith we pray that Christ in His faithfulness and in His own time will bring this child to personal faith. The 'efficacy' of baptism is not in the rite, in the water, but in the faithfulness of Christ. It might be argued that there is not one explicit reference in the New Testament to a child being baptised. Have we any warrant then for doing it? If we require explicit texts for our practice, then there would be no warrant for women to come to the Lord's Table! There is no single explicit reference to that in the New Testament! Our warrant is not in isolated texts or precedents, but in the Gospel itself. Christ died for men and women, adults and infants, and we acknowledge that in faith in baptism and at the Lord's supper. If Christ died for all, then why not baptise all "willy nilly" indiscriminately?! NO! The One Baptism means that Christ baptises by the Spirit within the sphere of the Spirit, the Church, and the Spirit acts through the Word, where the Word is preached and heard and children are instructed. Faith, as the work of the Spirit, comes through the Word. So questions are put to the parents - "Do you believe...? Do you promise to instruct this little one...?" Baptism thus marks the frontier between the Church and the world. It is an evangelical sacrament which in a very wonderful way enshrines the whole Gospel of grace, which is unconditionally free "for us and our children" but which summons us and our children unconditionally to costly faith and discipleship. It enshrines the love of the Father, the substitution of the Son and the sovereign activity of the Spirit. So with joy we say with Luther, Baptizatus sum!

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