

THE EFFICACY OF BAPTISM

PART ONE: THE EFFICACY OF BAPTISM EXPLAINED¹

A. THE PROLOGUE

Shortly after Bill and Betty were saved, Bill's job with a pharmaceutical company required a move to a different location. They found a "good" church where they were graciously received. Pastor Roy was middle-aged but "cool." He preached "the Word." His messages were doctrinal with an emphasis on justification by faith. His moving stories were fascinating. But the logic of his expositions of Scripture were compelling and gripping. He was obviously well-educated and very intelligent. Bill especially, with his technical, logical mind, was very impressed. He thoroughly enjoyed the Pastor's TULIP sermons. "The Gospel" seemed to make more sense. Apparently, most Scripture could fit together quite well under what Pastor Roy called "the five points of Calvinism." Betty was more sensitive and emotional, sometimes confused. But Bill was gracious and understanding. He enjoyed helping her to understand better what they were hearing. It all sounded a bit like this:

B. THE LOGIC OF TULIP

1) Since Adam's sin, all people are born into the world ***Totally Depraved***, or dead in sin and without a free will. No one can please God in any way. No one has either the willingness or the ability to believe the gospel and be saved. But God the Father had a marvelous plan all worked out. 2) By predestination and ***Unconditional Election*** He had selected certain ones out of all mankind whom He would miraculously save. These chosen ones would be called His *elect*. Obviously, God willingly predestinated all the rest (the non-elect) to eternal damnation and torment.² 3) God the Son would come to earth with the main purpose to suffer and die to redeem those whom God the Father had predestined to save. In that sense, it was a ***Limited Atonement***. Christ's work of the Cross was/is limited, (i.e. only for the *elect*) and no one else. God preordained that salvation of His *elect* would be *by His grace through faith* in the Gospel of Christ. 4) But no "dead," depraved sinner, even though one of God's *elect*, has *the grace, faith* or willingness to accept Christ. Therefore God the Holy Spirit by His ***Irresistible Grace*** regenerates the *elect* with new life. Because of its power, this is referred to as *efficacious grace* or as the *effectual calling* of the *elect*. In this way, only the *elect* are granted the *gift of faith* to "willingly" accept Christ and be "saved." In other words, the new birth or regeneration of the *elect* must precede their *faith*. 5) And those who are thus *effectually called* will persevere in faith and good works until the end of life. This is referred to as the ***Perseverance of the Saints***. However, it is also claimed that only those who persevere unto the end will be saved (Mt. 24:13). Thus perseverance becomes an added condition for one's salvation. Numerous Calvinists have claimed something

¹ This paper deals with problems concerning the efficacy or effectiveness of baptism, particularly as it relates to infant baptism as practiced by some Reformed churches. This is known as pedobaptism. According to R. C. Sproul, Reformed Theology is built upon two foundations: 5-Point Calvinism and Covenant Theology. As a result, Reformed Theology appeals to both systems to justify their practice of infant baptism. However, it should be noted that most Reformed Baptists reject infant baptism and yet many hold to 5-Point Calvinism. As such, not all Calvinists practice infant baptism. In this paper, we are dealing specifically with the pedobaptism of Reformed Theology. Many reformed theologians teach the efficacy of the sacraments, especially baptism. To better understand the problems of 5-Point Calvinism, see the Biblical Resource paper on *Calvinism*. For an explanation from the viewpoint of Reformed Theology, see *The Efficacy of Baptism* by Richard Holdeman. This short article explains a reformed view of baptism. <https://gentlereformation.com/2019/04/25/the-efficacy-of-baptism/>

² *Double predestination* may be a good tag for this, but how is it possible to have one without the other?

like this: These “doctrines of grace (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints) are the warp and woof of the biblical gospel cherished by so many saints for centuries.”³ But are they, really?

C. THE TROUBLING QUESTIONS

1. Bill’s Questions: Although very impressed with the logic of TULIP, Bill wrestled with many unanswered questions. This was challenging and exciting to him. His discussions with Pastor Roy were enjoyable and stimulating. He appreciated books loaned or recommended to him. He started reading downloads from Reformed sites on the Internet — even Calvin’s earth-shaking *Institutes*. But questions continued to haunt him and stir him on. Why would God desire to create billions of people that He was absolutely unwilling to ever save? How could God find pleasure in His own eternal damnation of this vast multitude of reprobates, who are what they are by His sovereign predestination? How could He then judge them and hold them accountable for not doing something they could never do because He had deliberately predetermined to withhold from them the necessary means to do so? Is this the true meaning of God’s infinite love and divine justice? Could this be the manifestation of a loving, merciful, gracious God who does not want anyone to perish (2 Pet. 3:9)? If He loved any of the non-elect, would He not have at least given them a free choice to either accept Him or condemn themselves by their own rejection of Him? Is it really true that Christ Himself came to planet earth to specifically suffer and die only for God’s elect? Did He just “taste death” for the elect (Heb. 2:9)? Could I any longer conscientiously tell my unsaved friends that Christ died for them? Is the “all” at the beginning of Isaiah 53:6⁴ different from the “all” at the end? How can we be so sure that “the world” (Jn. 3:16) really means only *the world of the elect*? Does the “whosoever” (Jn. 3:16), the helpless “ungodly” (Rom. 5:6), the “sinners” (Rom. 5:8; 1 Tim. 5:8), and the “all” (1 Tim. 2:4, 6), refer only to the elect? Is that what the Greek means? How could Jesus sincerely rebuke his rejecters for their unbelief (Jn. 6:36) while knowingly withholding the gift of faith from them? How can anyone know for certain that he is one of the elect? Or that he would surely persevere in faith and good works to the end of his earthly life?
2. Betty’s Questions: Although similar questions hounded Betty, she had no real desire to discuss them much with Bill. When she did think about them, it was mostly in relation to “Little Willy.” Tests had confirmed that their expected child was a boy. His name would be William III. Bill called him “Little Willy.” Betty’s questions only intensified after his birth. He was such an adorable child. But she was hauntingly anxious, often troubled. When will Little Willy begin to manifest his depravity? How will it be evident to us? And how will we deal with it? Is it really true that he is without a free will to make good moral choices? Just how “dead” is he — really? If he has no ability or even willingness to believe and obey the truth, how can we instruct him to willingly do what’s right? How can we teach him about God’s character and His standard of perfection? How can Willy believe what we share with him about his sin? About his behavior that needs to change? Or about his need to confess his sin? Or his need for Christ? How can we hold him personally accountable for his sinful behavior? When will this “irresistible grace” be granted to him so he can obey the truth? And how will I know? What if Little Willy is not one of God’s elect? How can we know for sure? And when? How should we be praying for Willy, not knowing for certain that he is among God’s

³ John Piper website: <https://www.desiringgod.org/>

⁴ All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

elect? And if he isn't one of the elect, does God even want us to pray for him? Would God burden folks to pray for those He has predestined for "eternal damnation?" Can we confidently assure Willy that God loves him? Personally? And that Jesus died for him? Could I enjoy the glories of Heaven thinking that God may have willingly made no provision for Willy? Oh, dear God, How can we know? When will we know? What are we to think? And...?

Through his wife, Pastor Roy became aware of Betty's frustrations, anxieties and fears. He saw this as the opportunity to talk to Bill about the urgency of Willy's baptism. From his reading, Bill was not surprised. But this was a problem. You see, he and Betty still only believed in adult baptism as a testimony of faith. What follows comes from what the pastor told them and what Bill "learned" about the sacraments from his reading. In this way, Bill and Betty seemed to eventually find some threads of hope for Willy's future. Their "hope" had to do with Reformed teaching on the *covenant of grace* and the *efficacy of the sacraments*, especially *baptism*, as a *means of grace for salvation* of the elect.

D. THE COVENANT OF GRACE

Reformed teaching on the sacraments is firmly rooted in the hermeneutics of covenant theology with its focus on the so-called *covenant of grace*. Foundational in Reformed theology is the concept that the Christian Church started back in the days of either Adam or Abraham. So all the biblical Covenants, including all those between God and the nation of Israel back in Old Testament times, are thought to have application to the Church today. To support such ideas, Reformed theologians, influenced by Augustinian thinking, have developed quite an elaborate system of *covenant theology*.

Probably most Reformed theologians speak of what is often referred to as the covenant of redemption. This is usually thought to be a covenant between the Godhead, particularly between the Father and the Son. It is also supposed that the "first covenant made with man was the covenant of works.... [But] Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called a covenant of grace... promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life [i.e. the elect] His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.... This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the Gospel: under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews.... Under the Gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper..." (WCF-7#2, 3, 5, 6).⁵

The often-quoted Calvin wrote that under the new covenant, the Communion⁶ has been substituted for Passover and "baptism has been substituted for circumcision, and performs the same office"

⁵ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), Ch. 7, Articles 2, 3, 5, and 6.

⁶ Calvin indicated that "the communion of the flesh and blood of Christ ["by which Christ transfuses His life into us"] is necessary to all who aspire to the heavenly life..." (ICR4-17#9, 10). Hodge claimed that just "as the Word, when attended by the demonstration of the Spirit, becomes the wisdom and power of God unto salvation; so does the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, when thus attended, become a real means of grace, not only signifying and sealing, but really conveying to the believing recipient, Christ and all the benefits of His redemption [which certainly must include eternal salvation]. In the Lord's Supper, therefore, the believer receives Christ. [And]... in the Lord's Supper believers are thus united to Christ and to one another.... The faith, however, of those who would acceptably partake of the Lord's Supper, is faith not only in Christ, but also in the sacrament itself." C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 3, 622-24. More could be said re the Lord's Table, but this is not a main concern in this paper.

(ICR4-16#4).⁷ Just as circumcision was administered to infants so “baptism is properly administered to infants as a thing due to them. The Lord did not anciently bestow circumcision upon them without making them partakers of all the things signified by circumcision” (ICR4-16#5). Concerning the baptism of infants, he argued, “If the kingdom of heaven is theirs, why should they be denied the sign by which access, as it were, is opened to the Church, that being admitted into it they may be enrolled among the heirs of the heavenly kingdom?” (ICR4-16#7). Some agree with Calvin and Hodge “that baptism is dispensed to infants on the ground of presumptive election or presumptive regeneration.”⁸ Other Reformed teachers at least agree that the grounds for the baptism of infant children of believers is simply that the sign and seal of the covenant of grace is to be administered to them as a major *means of grace*.

E. THE MEANS OF GRACE

The “means of grace... are claimed to be “those institutions which God has ordained to be the ordinary channels of grace, *i.e.*, of the supernatural influences of the Holy Spirit, to the souls of men. The means of grace... are the Word, sacraments, and prayer.”⁹ This is consistent with the “Westminster divines”¹⁰ who wrote, “The outward and ordinary means¹¹ whereby Christ communicateth to us [the Elect] the benefits of redemption are, His ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation” (WSC-88).¹² “The means of grace are the channels along which the saving and sanctifying grace of God flows.”¹³ Hodge clarifies the meaning of this *saving grace*; “The word grace, when we speak of the means of grace, includes three things: 1st — An unmerited gift, such as the remission of sin; 2nd — The supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit; 3rd — The subjective effects of that influence on the soul. Faith, hope, and charity [love], for example, are graces.”¹⁴ [And if this be true, then *ordinarily* baptism as a means of *grace* results in *the forgiveness of sin*. And if one’s sins are forgiven, is he not saved since *forgiveness of sin* is the direct result of one’s justification? (Col. 1:14)].

Most Reformed thinkers also recognize other *means of grace*. For instance, how could there be an *administration* of the sacraments without Church authority through its officers? Partly due to his views on *the keys* (Matt. 16:19; 18:18) in relation to the sacraments (ICR4-1#22), Calvin claimed that “to those to whom He [God] is a Father, the Church must also be a mother.... [And] “beyond

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book. 4, Ch. 16, Art. 4.

⁸ John Murray, “Christian Baptism, Second Article IV, Infant Baptism,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 14:1 (Nov. 51) 10-11. Murray (1898-1975) was professor mostly at Westminster Theological Seminary (1930-1966).

⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, 466. C. Hodge “was the principal of Princeton Theological Seminary between 1851 and 1878. He was one of the greatest exponents and defenders of historical Calvinism in America during the 19th century.” Wikipedia.

¹⁰ A common phrase used for the men who produced the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF), the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (WSC) and the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (WLC).

¹¹ These means, although not the only ones, are referred to as *ordinary* simply because there are rare, *extra-ordinary* situations where one or more means are apparently not essential for salvation. For instance, infants who die either before baptism or shortly thereafter prior to coming to the age of accountability but without faith in Christ are considered among the Elect. The *elect* thief on the cross, was saved by faith, but without any opportunity for baptism prior to his death. The means of grace are NOT effectual for anyone who is NOT of the Elect. And baptism does NOT guarantee one’s final perseverance for salvation.

¹² From *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1647), Answer to Question 88.

¹³ John Murray, “Christian Baptism, Second Article IV, Infant Baptism,” 28.

¹⁴ C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, V3, 499.

the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for” (ICR4-1#1, 4). Thus, many consider the Church and its ministers with *power of the keys* as other *means of grace*, especially for the *forgiveness of sin*.

The sacraments are “real channels of grace to believers.... The sacraments serve to strengthen our faith in Christ, and to develop all the other Christian graces.... [The] sacraments are real means of grace.”¹⁵ As one contemporary Reformed theologian put it, “[The] sacraments are means of grace — and not of grace in general, but of redeeming grace.... [The] preaching and sacraments are God’s means of reaching us... preaching and sacrament create and confirm faith.”¹⁶ [So would not both result in the salvation of the elect? What is *redeeming grace* if not a special grace for the *redemption* of “elect” sinners?] This may be the reason why one contemporary, Reformed theologian claims that Calvin and the Reformers “retained [from Roman Catholicism] the idea that the sacraments are ‘means of grace,’ vehicles through which God is pleased to apply grace to believers” (WCF-14#1).... “[And] calling baptism a ‘means of grace’ distinguishes the Reformed tradition from Protestants who conceive of baptism as a mere symbol.... [But] baptism is much more than a symbol [or sign]. In the language of the Bible, spiritual realities such as rebirth, renewal, forgiveness, salvation, and union with Christ [all benefits of the *covenant of grace*] are intimately associated with the rite of baptism.”¹⁷ And how so?

F. THE EFFICACY OF THE SACRAMENTS

“Classical Calvinism teaches that the sacraments are ‘signs and seals of the covenant of grace’ and ‘effectual [or efficacious] means of salvation.’”¹⁸ *Efficacious* is defined as “having the power to produce a desired effect... ”¹⁹ which, in this case, is *salvation*. Consistent with Calvin, this claim is made: “The sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of His Spirit in them that by faith receive them” (WSC-91). So Reformed teachers usually insist that there is no efficacy in the Sacraments by themselves. However, “By the working of the Holy Spirit and the blessing of Christ, the sacraments [themselves] ‘become effectual means of salvation.’”²⁰ And so a “promise is made to those who rightly receive the sacraments that they shall thereby and therein be made partakers of the blessings of which the sacraments are the divinely appointed signs and seals.”²¹

“A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ in His church, to signify, seal, and exhibit unto those that are within the covenant of grace [the elect], the benefits of His mediation” (WLC-

¹⁵ Francis R. Beattie, *The Westminster Shorter Catechism Project, The Presbyterian Standard*, Ch. 22. “The Means of Grace....” <https://www.shortercatechism.com/> All Catholic, Protestant and most cultic groups would readily acknowledge that “God’s grace” has a huge area of meaning in Scripture, including God’s *unmerited favor* or God’s *supernatural, enabling power* or both, depending on the context.

¹⁶ Michael S. Horton, “What Makes Something a Sacrament?” *Evangelium*, Vol. 4, Issue 1 (Jan/Feb 2006). Horton is Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary California.

¹⁷ Richard L. Pratt, *Reformed Perspectives Magazine*, “Baptism as a Sacrament of the Covenant,” (Vol. 7, No. 4, 1/23-29/05). http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/ric_pratt/th.pratt.baptism.html (Dr. Pratt is a contemporary Professor of OT at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, FL)

¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_grace

¹⁹ From *Miriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary*. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/efficacious>

²⁰ Lyle Bierma, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, edited by Gregg Strawbridge (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing), 2003, 243.

²¹ C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, 499.

162).²² Hodge clarifies that “the word ‘exhibit,’ as here used, means to confer, or impart.”²³ [And, since the greatest benefit of Christ’s mediation *or redemption* (WSC-88) is eternal salvation, then is not eternal salvation conferred or imparted to believers by the sacraments?] Murray clarifies the meaning of *seal*. He writes, “And what is its purpose as a *seal*? As seal it authenticates, confirms, [and] guarantees the reality and security of this covenant grace,”²⁴ which is thereby promised.

G. THE EFFICACY OF BAPTISM

Ever since the days of the Great Reformation, most people identified as “Christians” have believed and practiced either *baptismal regeneration* and/or *the efficacy of baptism*. Most pastors within the Reformed tradition, like us, baptize adults “on the basis of an intelligent and credible confession” of faith. However, except for some Reformed Baptists and others, most Reformed pastors holding to Covenant Theology also practice infant baptism.²⁵ Here is a sampling of thoughts by Calvin, the Westminster divines, and a few others that demonstrate Reformed thinking on why or how baptism is regarded as efficacious.

1. From John Calvin: “When the Lord enjoins Abraham to observe circumcision (Gen. 17:10) He promises that He would be a God unto him and to his seed..., words [that] include the promise of eternal life” (ICR4-16#3). The promise... is one in both [circumcision and baptism], viz., the promise of the paternal favour of God, of forgiveness of sins, and eternal life. And the thing figured is one and the same, viz., regeneration.... For just as circumcision... was their first entrance into the Church... so now we are initiated by baptism, so as to be enrolled among His people.... The “circumcision of the infant... [was also] a seal [or guarantee] of the promise of the covenant” (ICR4-16#5). “By baptism we are [also] ingrafted into the body of Christ, (1 Cor. 12:13)” (ICR4-14#22).

“Do you think that the water is only a figure [or sign] to us? It is such a figure that the reality is conjoined with it, for God does not promise us anything in vain. Accordingly it is certain that in Baptism the forgiveness of sins is offered to us and we receive it.... How is this grace applied to us in Baptism? In it we are clothed with Jesus Christ, and receive His Spirit, provided that we do not make ourselves unworthy of the promises given to us in it” (CC-328-29, 331).²⁶ Calvin indicated that “God, [1] regenerating us in baptism,²⁷ [2] ingrafts us into the fellowship of His Church, and [3] makes us His by adoption...” (ICR4-17#1). “By it [baptism] we are received into God’s church and set apart from all other people and alien religions.... [We] believe that anyone who aspires to reach eternal life ought to be baptized only once without ever repeating it — for we cannot be born twice. Yet this baptism is profitable not only when the water is on us and when we receive it but throughout our entire lives...” (BC, 34).²⁸ In other words, “We ought to consider that at whatever

²² From the *Westminster Larger Catechism* answer to Question #162 (first part).

²³ C. Hodge. Vol 3, 500. (After citing WLC-162).

²⁴ John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), 87

²⁵ Most theologians refer to infant baptism as *pedobaptism* and believer’s baptism as *credobaptism*.

²⁶ From John Calvin, *The Catechism*, (1541). Referred to as *Calvin’s Catechism* or the *Geneva Catechism*.

²⁷ Calvin’s statement here on God “regenerating us in baptism” seems to be inconsistent with his numerous denials elsewhere of Luther’s “baptismal regeneration.”

²⁸ From *The Belgic Confession*, Article 34, “The Sacrament of Baptism.” This translation is based on the French text of 1619, which was the Synod of Dort (1618-19) revision, “one of the best symbolical statements of Reformed doctrine.” <https://www.apuritansmind.com/creeds-and-confessions/the-belgic-confession-circa-1561-a-d/>

time we are baptised, we are washed and purified once for the whole of life. Wherefore, as often as we fall, we must recall the remembrance of our baptism, and thus fortify our minds, so as to feel certain and secure of the remission of sins” (ICR4-15#3).

2. From the Westminster Divines: The Westminster Standards,²⁹ “taken in all their parts, teach that water baptism signifies and seals our union with Christ, our regeneration by the Spirit, the remission of our sins, and our being raised to newness of life in Christ”³⁰ Following Calvin’s thinking, “Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein Christ hath ordained the washing with water... to be a sign and seal of ingrafting into Himself, Gal. 3:27 of remission of sins by His blood, Mk. 1:4 and regeneration by His Spirit, Tit. 3:5; Eph. 5:26; of adoption, Gal. 3:26-27...” (WLC-165).³¹ “Baptism is a sacrament, wherein the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord’s” (WSC-94). And what are these benefits of the covenant? A. A. Hodge identifies them as “regeneration, justification, sanctification, perseverance to the end, glorification, etc. — i.e., all the benefits of the new covenant.”³² Other sample quotes make this plain.
3. From Other Reformed Sources: C. Hodge clearly stated that “the institution [of baptism] is either to symbolize or to effect the cleansing of the soul from the guilt and pollution of sin, by the blood and spirit of Christ.”³³ In his exposition of Ephesians 5:26, Hodge provides us with a fairly good summary of the Reformed teaching on baptism: “There can be little doubt, therefore, that by ‘the washing of water,’ the Apostle meant baptism.... In this case *katharisas* [cleanses] must refer to expiation or sacrificial purification, i.e. to washing away of guilt...as preceding sanctification... we are said to be cleansed (whether from guilt or pollution) by baptism. What does this mean? How does baptism in either of these senses wash away sin? The Protestant and scriptural answer is that baptism cleanses from sin just as the Word does.... God is pleased to connect the benefits of redemption with the believing reception of the truth. And He is pleased to connect these same benefits with the believing reception of baptism. That is, as the Spirit works with and by the truth, so He works with and by baptism in communicating the blessings of the covenant of grace. Therefore, as we are said to be saved by the Word, with equal propriety we are said to be saved by baptism.... The scriptural doctrine concerning baptism, according to Reformed churches is... [that] it is one of the conditions of salvation. ‘Whosoever believes and is baptized shall be saved.’ (Mark 16:16)³⁴... Baptism is a means of grace, that is, a channel through which the Spirit confers grace.... [Baptism] is the public conveyance to him of the benefits of the covenant, and his inauguration into the number of the redeemed.... Infants are baptized on the faith of their

²⁹ This phrase is often used especially in reference to the WCF, the WLC and the WSC.

³⁰ Beattie, Ch. 22 “Means of Grace, The Sacraments: Baptism.”

³¹ Obviously, the Westminster men followed Calvin in thinking that ALL these references, (which are included in WLC) refer to water baptism, not Holy Spirit baptism!

³² A. A. Hodge, *The Westminster Confession of Faith, Commentary*, “Of the Sacraments,” Ch. 27. Art. 2.

³³ C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, 526.

³⁴ The author adds, “It has, however, the necessity of precept, not the necessity of a means sine qua non.” And again he adds, “Baptism is a means of grace, that is, a channel through which the Spirit confers grace; not always, not upon all recipients, nor is it the only channel, nor is it designed as the ordinary means of regeneration. Faith and repentance are the gifts of the Spirit and fruits of regeneration, and yet they are required as conditions of baptism.”

parents. And their [the infants'] baptism secures all the benefits of the covenant of grace, provided they [eventually] ratify that covenant by faith...."³⁵

A. A. Hodge confirms, "Each [circumcision and baptism] in its own age was the authoritatively appointed door of entrance into the fold of salvation, and the badge of citizenship in the kingdom of God.... Circumcision as well as baptism unites us to Christ.³⁶ He also claimed that "Baptism is declared to be 'the circumcision of Christ' (Col. 2:11, 12). We are said to be actually 'buried with Christ by baptism' (Rom. 6:4); i.e., united to Him in His death.... 'As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ' (Gal. 3:27).... The sacraments were designed to 'apply' — i.e., actually to convey — to believers the benefits of the new covenant. If they are 'seals' of the covenant, they must of course, as a legal form of investiture, actually convey the grace represented to those to whom it belongs [the elect]."³⁷ And again A. A. Hodge writes in reference to John's baptism, "Men were exhorted to be baptized in order to wash away their sins. It is declared that men must be born of water [in baptism] and of the Spirit, and that baptism as well as faith is an essential condition of salvation. The effect of baptism is declared to be purification."³⁸ Commenting on the meaning of WSC 94, another teacher writes, "This means that baptism does more than just symbolize or represent salvation. It *seals* salvation to us... baptism makes our salvation secure... officially designating us as those who have been saved by Christ. Paul agrees. Baptism takes us out of the old life and puts us into the new [Rom. 6:3, 4].... Baptism is the Biblically sanctioned drama of the conversion experience... baptism is a seal of membership in the body of Christ. This we know from Jesus saying '—of such is the Kingdom—.'"³⁹

H. THE EPILOGUE

And so it is no mystery why Little Willy was baptized as an infant. At his baptism, both Bill and Betty were greatly comforted as Pastor Roy read from the *Liturgy of the Reformed Churches*, "Form for the Administration of Baptism." He read that "when we are baptized... God the Father witnesses and seals unto us, that He does make an eternal covenant of grace with us, and adopts us for His children and heirs...." [After words from Gen. 17:7 and Acts 2:39, he continues.] "Since then, baptism is come in the place of circumcision, therefore infants are to be baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God, and of His covenant...." [He asked Bill and Betty if they could acknowledge that] "our children... are sanctified in Christ, and therefore, as members of His Church ought to be baptized?" [Then he prayed] "...Father, we thank... Thee, that Thou hast forgiven us, and our children, all our sins, through the blood of Thy beloved Son Jesus Christ, and received us through Thy Holy Spirit as members of Thine only begotten Son, and adopted us to be Thy children, and sealed and confirmed the same unto us by holy baptism...."

In tears, Betty joyfully said to Bill, "Little Willy must be one of God's own elect! God would not give such promises to any of the predestined reprobates — would He?" Both were now more confident that baptism is efficacious and divine grace is *really... conferred by the Holy Spirit through baptism as a means of grace....* Bill and Betty felt much better about Little Willy's future.

³⁵ C. Hodge, *An Exposition of Ephesians*, 216 (From CD, *The Ages Digital Library*, under "Commentaries").

³⁶ A. A. Hodge, "Baptism and Infant Baptism", Art. IV. II, 2nd, (3.).

³⁷ A. A. Hodge, *WCF Commentary*, "Ch. 27 Of the Sacraments," Sec. II, Art. 4, (2-3).

³⁸ A. A. Hodge, "Baptism and Infant Baptism," Art. IV, I, (3.), (e).

³⁹ Bill Baldwin, "Of Such Is the Kingdom, A Biblical Defense of Presbyterian Baptism," 8-22-97. http://bettercovenant.org/papers/infant_baptism.html (Evidently a seal can be broken. For Baldwin continues, "Does Baptism automatically save the person being baptized? Clearly not. Some are baptized and fall away.").

Supposedly, Willy's baptism signified and actually sealed his *ingrafting into Christ, and [his] partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and [his] engagement to be the Lord's* (WSC-94). Of course, the greatest *benefit of the covenant of grace* is eternal salvation! Willy has now been thought to be *cleansed (whether from guilt or pollution) by baptism.... [And] baptism cleanses from sin just as the Word does....* [So, in this sense, he has been] *saved by baptism....*⁴⁰ But again, naturally Bill wondered; "Is salvation really by faith alone? Or is salvation by faith plus baptism?" This is our main concern over Reformed teaching on *the efficacy of baptism*.

PART TWO: THE EFFICACY OF BAPTISM REFUTED

The following represents a repudiation of the Reformed/Calvinist doctrines of TULIP, the covenant of grace, the efficacy of the sacraments as means of grace and the pedobaptist's baptism of infants.

A. THE THEOLOGY OF TULIP

1. Total Depravity: All people everywhere are commanded to repent (Acts 17:30) and believe in Christ (1 Jn. 3:23). As depraved as man is, he is born with a free will. He has the capacity to make choices, good or bad, in response to God's revelation and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. For this reason all mankind are justly held accountable for the choices they make.
2. Unconditional Election: Calvinism's doctrine of *unconditional election* does not comport with Scripture. There are several viable alternatives which do not turn God into a deterministic, micromanager of eternal destinies as portrayed by Calvinism. For example, *conditional election, timeless election, and corporate election* all present views that do not violate the free will of man. Historically, this organization has advocated the corporate view of election.⁴¹

Corporate election refers only to 1) Christ Himself, or 2) the nation of Israel⁴² or 3) believers, but never to unbelieving sinners. Christ is elected, and we believers are elected in Him (Eph. 1:4). And for what purpose? That "we should be holy and blameless before Him, in love!" In the corporate view, election of believers is never to justification, but to special blessings⁴³ and/or purposes. "Like election, no unsaved man was ever predestinated to anything."⁴⁴ Only believers are predestined to a position of heavenly blessings including adoption⁴⁵ as sons with an inheritance (Eph. 1:5-11) and to be "conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29).⁴⁶

3. Limited Atonement: The Scripture is clear: Christ was sent by the Father "to be the Savior of the world" (1 Jn. 4:14). And that's why He "takes away the sins of the whole world" (Jn. 1:29). Obviously, Christ is "the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (1 Jn. 2:2). He tasted death for everyone (Heb. 2:9) by dying "for the ungodly" (Rom.5:6). "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). Desiring all men to be saved (2 Pet. 3:9), He "gave Himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:4-6). Thus, whoever would do so, could trust in Him!

⁴⁰ Hodge, *An Exposition of Ephesians*, 216.

⁴¹ The Biblical Resource paper on Calvinism examines various views on election in more detail.

⁴² Especially is this revealed in the Synoptic Gospels and Romans 9 and 11.

⁴³ These blessings would include our present sanctification and future glorification (2 Thess. 2:13-14).

⁴⁴ Lawrence M. Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, (Pensacola, FL: Vance Publications), 1999 Ed., 383.

⁴⁵ Our adoption includes the coming "redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23).

⁴⁶ For a good discussion of predestination, foreknowledge, and Rom. 8:30, see Vance, 380-97.

4. Irresistible Grace: The Scripture is also clear concerning “grace” in soteriology: In the New Testament, faith always precedes the new birth or regeneration and/or justification. Faith is not a special gift only for the predestined, elect sinners. God’s grace, as His unmerited favor, particularly manifested in Christ, is offered and open to any sinner who willingly responds to it. It is not an irresistible power for regenerating only the predestined elect so they can believe the Gospel.
5. Perseverance of the Saints: Any and all those who trust in Christ alone for their eternal salvation have been justified. Christ’s own righteousness has been imputed to our heavenly accounts. Our position, as righteous in Christ before a holy God, is unchangeable. There are no other conditions, including our perseverance, which must be met. We are eternally secure in Christ and Him alone!

B. THE COVENANT OF GRACE

1. It is Unscriptural. The covenant of grace lacks any solid, biblical support. It is a *theological* concept rather than a *biblical* one. It is never mentioned in Scripture by name.
2. It is Based on Faulty Hermeneutics. Covenant theology and the covenant of grace are rooted in the departure from a more consistent use of *the literal, historical-grammatical method of interpretation* which started back in Augustine’s day. This came about through the acceptance of *allegorical interpretation*, particularly of unfulfilled prophetic scripture portions. This crumbling of the apostolic foundation initiated the gradual formation of the Catholic churches (East and West) with their liturgical sacramentalism. After the long period of the dark ages, the Great Reformation was a breath of fresh air. But it was not a clean break away from Roman bondage. Many of the early reformers retained the hermeneutical roots, the eschatology and much of the sacramental baggage of Rome. The Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterian and Reformed churches, some Methodists, Church of Christ and some Baptists and some cultic groups all trace their roots back to Augustine.
3. It Blurs Distinctives of Biblical Covenants and Economies. By misapplication of Progressive Revelation, all the Old Testament covenants are placed under the umbrella of the one, so-called covenant of grace for all of history; some very crucial distinctives of named, *biblical covenants* are blurred, if not obliterated.⁴⁷ The Abrahamic covenant was a major, foundational covenant primarily between God and Israel although it was ratified unilaterally by God Himself (Gen. 15:7-17). And a major part of that covenant was God’s promised gift of a specific land area only to Abraham and to his seed through Isaac and Jacob. This is a literal promise to Israel, not to the Church of the New Testament. Yet, in Reformed teaching, the Abrahamic covenant is thought to be the foundational part of the covenant of grace.
4. It Fails to Clearly Distinguish Israel From the Church. This failure has resulted in a *replacement theology*. Under the one umbrella of the covenant of grace, it was thought that the Church must have started with Abraham, if not Adam. So Israel must be the Church of the OT. And most OT references to Israel are reinterpreted to have reference to the Church. All

⁴⁷ For instance, 1) The temporal, bilateral, conditional Mosaic covenant is not “essentially the same” as the eternal, unilateral, unconditional, Abrahamic covenant; 2) It fails to make a clear dispensational distinction between OT law and NT grace. This tends to garble a) the gospel message of justification by faith with the *legalism of lordship salvation*, and b) the growth message of progressive sanctification by faith with the *legalism of Galatianism*; 3) The Gospel preached only to the Jews by the Apostles (Mt. 10:5-8; Lk. 18:34) and the Gospel preached to Jews and Gentiles by Paul (1 Cor. 1:17-24; 2:2; 15:1-4) are very different. The failure to take seriously this distinction has contributed further to views on lordship salvation, postmill preterism, kingdom building, etc.

this has led to chaos in Reformed eschatology. By allegorizing most Scripture having to do with unfulfilled prophecies, Reformed teachers have come up with an assortment of speculations without sound exegesis.

5. It Contributes to the False Idea of Sacraments as Means of Grace. Supposedly the covenant of grace is God's provision for salvation of the Church in both the Old and New Testaments. Grace in *the means of grace* phrase, although thought to be the result of God's undeserved favor granted only to God's elect, is understood in Reformed teaching to be *an efficacious power* for salvation granted partly through the sacraments. The "sign and seal" of this covenant of grace, which includes the Abrahamic covenant, is claimed to be 1) Passover and circumcision for the OT Church and 2) the Lord's Supper and baptism for the NT Church. The former are thought to be respectively replaced by the latter. There is no biblical support for such presuppositions.

C. THE EFFICACY OF THE SACRAMENTS AS MEANS OF GRACE

The efficacy of the Word of God, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit for the eternal salvation of sinners is far superior to any supposed efficacy found in sacraments. Both God's Word and His Spirit are essential and efficacious means for this purpose. The Gospel message is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes..." (Rom. 1:16). God is pleased that "through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21). For the message of Christ and Him crucified is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). And faith "comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17) which is powerful (Heb. 4:12). But the preaching must "not be in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:4). For He alone has power to convict of sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn. 16:8).

However, Scripture does not teach the efficacy of any sacrament as a means of grace for the eternal salvation of any lost sinner. Prior to His passion and ascension, Jesus gave us two ordinances to practice. The first is Baptism; the second is the Lord's Table or Communion. Christ's great commission applies to us today. In our "going" we are to preach the Gospel to all creation (Mk. 16:15) and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing⁴⁸ them (the believing disciples) in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19). Baptism serves 1) as a picture of our identification in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and 2) as a testimonial sign of one's faith in Christ alone, not in Christ plus the sacrament. The second ordinance is the Lord's Table. It also serves as a testimonial of our faith in the finished work of Christ. It was meant also to serve as a memorial. The elements represent the shed blood and broken body of our Lord Jesus, who simply said, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:24). The observance of either of these two ordinances was never meant to be *efficacious* for the salvation of anyone. However, as acts of obedience, testimony, fellowship, and remembrance, they certainly should play a part in the believer's spiritual growth and witness.

D. THE BAPTISM OF INFANTS:

It seems quite possible, if not probable, that most followers of Reformed teaching have been baptized under the covenant of grace, into the Church and "into Christ" as innocent but unbelieving infants. There is no biblical basis for this practice, which has given many people a faulty basis for

⁴⁸ This baptism is by immersion rather than by either pouring or sprinkling. But the mode of baptism is not a main concern in this paper.

hope.

1. Baptism in/with Water as a *Sign and Seal*: As in the case of the *covenant of grace*, Scripture makes no reference whatsoever to baptism being a so-called “seal” of/for anything. It is only a symbol or sign of the believers’ (not infants’) new birth through identification with Christ. And, in the case of an infant, baptism cannot possibly be “unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins,” especially when the “him” refers to “the party baptized,” as taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF-28.1). And how could baptism be a *seal* of all these things when there is absolutely no guarantee that they will ever be his through personal faith in Christ?
2. Infant Baptism Replacing Circumcision (Col. 2:11-12): This text is used by Reformed teachers as a main support for infant baptism replacing circumcision. But the text does not support this. In this context *circumcision, baptism, burial, and resurrection* are all terms used in a spiritual sense. Gentile believers in Colossae had no need for a legalistic, physical, Jewish circumcision. They had already been spiritually circumcised in heart by Christ Himself. The “*putting off* [or removal] of the old life occurs at the moment of salvation, when a believer is buried with Christ in baptism by the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13) and is raised with Him to new life. This co-burial and co-resurrection is [only] pictured in [water] baptism.”⁴⁹
3. Infant Baptism and Circumcision: Baptism has no close relationship with circumcision, simply because they are not under the same covenant. The contrasts between circumcision and baptism are significantly obvious: a) Circumcision leaves a permanent, physiological change in one’s body. Baptism does not. b) Circumcision was basically for Israel under the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants in the OT. Baptism is only for the Church and this present age. c) Circumcision was national, commanded only for Jews and Jewish proselytes. Baptism is spiritual, commanded for both Gentile and Jewish believers. d) Eligibility for circumcision was based on one’s physical birth. Eligibility for baptism is based on one’s spiritual birth. e) Circumcision was a sign and seal of the Abrahamic Covenant. Baptism is never identified in Scripture as a seal of anything. It is a testimony of one’s faith in Christ. f) The uncircumcised, male infant was “cut off from his people” (Gen. 17:14).⁵⁰ There is no comparable penalty for failure to baptize either infants or adult believers! g) Infant girls were never included in circumcision which is for only male infants — of both believers and unbelievers. But in Reformed theology *both* infant boys and girls of *only* believers (one or both parents) are to be baptized.⁵¹
4. Infant Security: There is evidence that children who die in infancy prior to reaching an age of accountability or discretion go directly to heaven (2 Sam. 12:23), but not on the basis of either 1) being included in the so-called covenant of grace, or 2) being presumably regenerated already by the Spirit. There is no biblical evidence that either circumcision or baptism has anything to do with a so-called covenant of grace. Even David’s son died before he could receive the sign and seal of the covenant with all its promises (2 Sam. 12:18).

⁴⁹ Norman L. Geisler, “Colossians,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (1983) 677. And this “picture” makes more sense when the mode of baptism is by immersion rather than either sprinkling or pouring.

⁵⁰ The severity of this judgment is vividly illustrated in Ex. 4:24-26 and Josh. 5:2-9.

⁵¹ When and how, if ever, were infant females sealed as members into the OT Covenant and Church? And if not, why not? Does female baptism today accomplish the same purposes for girls as OT infant-male circumcision and NT infant-male baptism did/does for boys? If so, how so?

5. Infant Baptism, Non-Scriptural: Scripture supports only the baptism of believers. Reformed theologians sometimes acknowledge the truth that “there is really no clear case of infant baptism anywhere in the biblical record.” Jesus Himself commanded believers to disciple and baptize other believers, (Matt. 28:19). The baptism of the jailor followed the appeal, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved.” This was stated after the spoken Word had been proclaimed (Acts 16:30-33). Obviously, infants cannot meet such basic qualifications as hearing the Word, by which faith comes (Rom 10:17), and believing in Christ.
6. Household Baptisms: A main argument used to support infant baptism is “that the households of Cornelius, Lydia, the Philippian jailer, Crispus, and Stephanus (Acts 11:14; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16) surely included infants.”⁵² But this is no real support for infant baptism. It is only an assumption based on silence. Infants are not believers. By comparing Acts 10:43-48 with Acts 11:15-18, it is clear that everyone who believes in Jesus “receives forgiveness of sins” and the “baptism” of/by the Holy Spirit. (Peter identified this unique “falling” of the Holy Spirit as the “gift” or “baptism” of the Holy Spirit that John had prophesied.) And only then were these Gentile believers baptized in water. And as he spoke, these uncircumcised, unbaptized Gentiles were indwelt or baptized by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke in foreign languages, unknown to them, when their hearts were cleansed “by faith” (Acts 11:14-17; 15:7-9). It is neither likely nor even humanly possible for 8-day old infants to either speak in their mother tongue or a foreign tongue or exercise faith in the Gospel Peter preached. It seems clear from God’s Word that only believers, and not infants, should be baptized.⁵³ Forgiveness of sins is the result of faith in Christ, not baptism. And a believer’s baptism in water should only follow, not precede his baptism or indwelling by the Spirit.
7. Confidence in the Powers of Baptism: Because of all the false claims made about *the efficacy of the sacraments*, particularly baptism, parents are often given a false confidence in their child’s salvation or eternal security. And often such children grow up with the faulty assumption of a relationship with God based on the promises of the covenant of grace and their own baptism, as the seal of their relationship to that covenant.⁵⁴ And, also, many of those baptized as adults have placed their hope in their baptism. No doubt, this is due in part to lack of knowledge on *the other side of the issue*, even though Calvin and most Reformed teachers speak of it.
8. The Actual Insufficiency of Baptism: *The other side of the issue* is this: Regardless of all that Reformed theologians and teachers say about its *efficacy*, baptism does not guarantee the salvation of any baptized infant or adult. For instance, a contemporary theologian typically

⁵² Roy B. Zuck, Review of *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*. Edited by Gregg Strawbridge. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003. From *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 162:647 (July 2005) 372-74.

⁵³ Some Reformed teachers also believe that an “unbelieving spouse of a believer should, unless resistant, undergo baptism since he/she is covenantally ‘set apart’ by being in the believer’s household.” G. Bahnsen

⁵⁴ Our own Lance Latham may have been an example of this. He must have been told quite early on that he had been baptized as an infant under the Covenant of Grace. He “knew” that his baptism, as one of the means of grace, was “made effectual to the elect for salvation” (WSC-88), and that it did “signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord’s” (WSC-94). Raised in the home of a strict Presbyterian pastor, by the time he was five years of age he had already memorized all 107 questions and answers of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. At age seven, he could recite by memory the entire books of John, Romans and James at one sitting. Yet, by his own testimony, he did not see his personal need of the Savior until he was finally saved at 21 years of age. About this same time at his father’s Presbyterian church, “279 of the church members [presumably all baptized] were saved” under the preaching of W. P. Nicholson. (D. Breese, *Lance, A Testament of Grace* (Awana Youth Association) 1978.

claims: “Presbyterians do not believe that baptism is essential to salvation, nor do we believe that we are saved by baptism.”⁵⁵ However, consistent with others, he also claims, “The baptized person is God’s child. He counts us as His; He accepts us as His; in fact we are His. This is the basic meaning of “partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace.... The sacraments are not only expressive of truth [as signs]; they are also effective [as seals] in making that truth a living reality. ‘By the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost.’”⁵⁶ Professor Murray put it this way: “Though circumcision and baptism are the signs and seals of covenant union and communion, it does not follow that everyone who bears this sign and seal is an actual partaker of the grace signified and sealed and is therefore an heir of eternal life.... It must be admitted that this appears very anomalous, and it presents us [Reformed theologians] with great difficulty. There have been many attempts made to resolve the difficulty.^[57] It should be remembered that this anomaly does not concern infant baptism alone: it is a difficulty that inheres in the question of the baptism of adults as well.... [The] sign and seal of baptism can be no pledge or guarantee to us of that which baptism signifies [and seals] except as we are mindful of God’s covenant, embrace its promises, discharge its obligations, and lay hold in faith upon the covenant faithfulness of God.”⁵⁸ Is this simply a *difficult anomaly* for Reformed teachers? Or is it possibly an *unresolved contradiction*? Or maybe a sovereign, *mysterious sacramentum*?⁵⁹

E. THE EFFICACY OF BAPTISM

The vast majority of people in the world identified as “Christians” believe either in *baptismal regeneration* or what many prefer to call *the efficacy of Baptism*. It seems evident to us that much of the erroneous, Reformed teaching on the efficacy of baptism has often resulted from 1) their faulty presupposition that sacraments are *means of grace*, associated with an unbiblical *covenant of grace*, 2) their misinterpretation of passages that must refer to *the efficacious, Holy Spirit baptism* as though they refer to *water baptism* and 3) their failure to deal with about 150 Scripture portions that make it so clear that salvation is by faith alone. Here are a few comments on some “problem” verses, mostly related to the second reason just given:

1. Baptism of the Holy Spirit by Christ (Mk. 1:8; Acts 1:5): John the Baptist made a clear distinction between water baptism and Holy Spirit baptism. And the latter is not the former! John prophesied that, although he baptized with water, Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Mk. 1:8; Jn. 1:33; Acts 11:16) and fire (Lk. 3:16). This would be a spiritual baptism of *the Spirit by Christ* (Mk. 1:8). Then Jesus promised His disciples that they would be “baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5) and that the Holy Spirit would be sent to actually dwell in them (Jn. 14:17). Having been sent by the Father (Jn. 14:16, 26) and by the Son (Jn. 16:7), He, the Holy Spirit, gloriously came, first at Pentecost when believers were “filled with the

⁵⁵ Harry G. Goodykoontz, (Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary), “Baptism in the Presbyterian Church,” (June 2002).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ C. Hodge makes a noble effort to do so in his *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, pgs. 589-590, and other places.

⁵⁸ John Murray, “Christian Baptism, Second Article IV, Infant Baptism,” *WTJ*, 14:1 (Nov. 51) 7, 43.

⁵⁹ The “Reformed understanding of baptism is highly sacramental. That is, Reformed theology views baptism as a mysterious encounter with God that takes place through a rite involving physical elements and special ceremony.... [The RC] “term ‘sacrament’ derives from Ephesians 5:32 in the Vulgate, where sacramentum translates the Greek word *mysterion*, meaning ‘mystery.’ Pratt, “Baptism as a Sacrament of the Covenant.”

Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4). Since that time all believers are baptized of the Spirit (Rom. 8:9b). Paul also wrote of the believer’s baptism *by the Spirit into one body*.

2. Holy Spirit Baptism into one body (1 Cor. 12:13): “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body... and were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). Many Reformed teachers follow Calvin in claiming, “By [water] baptism we are ingrafted into the body of Christ, (1 Cor. 12:13)” (ICR4-16.22). To the contrary, baptism by the Holy Spirit, not water baptism, puts us “into Christ!” when we are justified by faith. Since the days of the miraculous comings of the Holy Spirit, all believers, not infants, are formed into one body which is the universal Church. “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...” (1 Cor. 12:12-13). This baptism of believers *by the Spirit into one body* is the same baptism as the baptism of believers *by the Spirit into Christ* (Rom. 6:3-4).
3. Holy Spirit Baptism into Christ (Rom. 6:3-4): In this verse Paul indicates that “all of us who [through faith] have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death” (Rom. 6:3-4). A recent Reformed teacher explained it this way: “To be baptized into Christ Jesus implies to be brought into personal relation to the Savior.... Paul... points out that baptizing people into Christ implies baptizing them into — i.e., in connection with the sacrament of baptism bringing them into personal relationship with — Christ’s *death*...”⁶⁰ Or, as another put it, “[Paul] wrote that, through [water] baptism, believers are united to Christ and die to sin (Rom. 6:3-7).”⁶¹ In contrast, Scripture teaches that sinners are *united to Christ* when they trust in Him alone for salvation. The word *baptism* in Rom. 6:3-4 may picture the believer’s spiritual baptism into Christ or the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-13), placing us *in Him* when we believe. The context of Romans 6 has to do with our positional identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. For there is really only one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, [and] one baptism (Eph. 4:4-5). And this *one baptism* is a baptism with/of/by the Spirit, not water! Any Reformed defense of this passage, and many others, as *water baptism* sounds too closely akin to *baptismal regeneration* which we, and supposedly Reformed theologians, reject.
4. Holy Spirit Baptism into Christ (Gal. 3:27): “For all who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal. 3:27). Calvin claimed that “we put on Christ in [water] baptism, (Gal. 3: 26-27)” (ICR4-15.6). Hendriksen, commenting on Gal. 3:27, wrote, “All those, then, who by means of baptism have truly laid aside, in principal, their garment of sin, and have truly been decked with the robe of Christ’s righteousness, having thus been buried with Him and raised with Him have put on Christ (cf. Rom. 6:3 ff 13:14; Col. 2:12, 13).”⁶² However, Gal 3:26-27, like Rom 6:3-4 and Col. 2:12-13, speaks of the believer’s spiritual baptism in/by/with the Holy Spirit. And all those “baptized [by the Spirit] into Christ” are “clothed... with Christ” (Gal. 3:27) and His righteousness which is imputed to believers by faith.
5. Faith Plus Baptism? (Mk. 16:16): “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:16). Many Reformed teachers use this verse to support baptism as a condition for salvation. Using this verse Hodge claimed baptism as “one

⁶⁰ William Hendriksen, *Romans Chapters 1-8*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 195.

⁶¹ Pratt, (RTS, Orlando) “Baptism as a Sacrament of the Covenant.”

⁶² Hendriksen, *Romans Chapters 9-16*.

of the conditions of salvation” and “means of grace.”⁶³ This is a perversion of truth. There is no mention of baptism in the latter, negative clause. Mark puts the emphasis where it should be, on the *believing*, since only unbelief leads to condemnation. No condemnation is attached to the symbol of baptism, because baptism does not save. However, believing does save. The mention of baptism only serves as a witness/testimony to confirm one’s *faith* to others. Then, too, concerning this passage, Dr. Ryrie makes note of a critical, textual problem: “The doubtful genuineness of verses 9-20 [of Mk. 16] makes it unwise to build a doctrine or base an experience on them (especially vv. 16-18).”⁶⁴

6. John’s Baptism of Repentance (Mk. 1:4): John’s baptism of water was unique. As the promised forerunner who would prepare the way of the Lord (Is. 40:3; Matt. 3:3), He appeared in the wilderness “preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Mk. 1:4; Lk.3:3). His preaching was only to “the people of Israel” (Acts 13:24) living only during Christ’s first coming and the transitional time prior to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Paul indicated to about 12 “disciples” at Ephesus, who had been baptized “into John’s baptism,” that their Christian experience was inadequate since they needed to believe in Jesus. He reminded them, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, Jesus.” Afterwards they were baptized again as believers in Jesus, presumably by Paul. Then they were baptized by the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-7). [But if John’s baptism efficaciously resulted in “the forgiveness of sins, then why should they be rebaptized?] Although Jesus, by His own request, was baptized in water by John (Matt. 3:13-17), His baptism certainly had nothing to do with His need of remission or forgiveness of sins!
7. Baptism For Forgiveness of Sins (Acts 2:38): Peter said, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Calvin claimed that it is God’s “will that all who have believed be baptized for the remission of sins (Mt. 28:19; Acts 2:38).” In other words, water baptism results in the remission of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit. This Reformed view is false. Our faith and position in Christ alone provide us with a total “redemption, the forgiveness of sins” — past, present, and future (Col 1:14; Rom. 8:1, 30). There are other far better options for interpretation of Acts 2:38:
 - [a] At this time, Peter’s message could have been uniquely related to John’s message. 1) Both men ministered during the early stage of church development in a transitional time of progressive revelation; 2) Both were Jewish in character. Like John the Baptist, Peter’s message was to “all the house of Israel” (Acts 2:36) living at that time; 3) Both emphasized repentance, not faith, as the condition for baptism; 4) Both assured their Jewish audience that subsequently their sins would be forgiven; and 5) Both John and Peter promised them of the baptism or reception of the Holy Spirit.
 - [b] The Greek word *eis*, translated “for” in Acts 2:38, like other Greek prepositions, has a large semantic domain. It is thus translated in numerous ways in different contexts and by different translators.⁶⁵ For instance, *eis* is sometimes translated as “of,” “concerning” or “with/in reference to” as in Acts 2:25 (same chapter) and Eph. 5:32, where *eis* appears 3

⁶³ Yet generally Reformed theologians also claim that baptism is not absolutely essential for salvation.

⁶⁴ Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, p. 1398. fn. 16:9-20.

⁶⁵ For instance, in light of varied contexts, the KJV men translated *eis* as “against, among, at, for, in, into, that, on, to, toward, unto, upon, etc.” In the next verse (Acts 2:39) it appears that *eis* may best be translated as “from.”

times.⁶⁶ If so, then the message would sound like “be baptized *in reference* to the forgiveness of sins [that you have by faith].”

[c] The term *eis* can also be translated as “because” or “because of” as in Matt. 12:41. It seems likely that the preposition, *eis* (for) could be translated either as “concerning” or “because of” the forgiveness of your sins.

[d] It is also possible to take the clause “and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” as parenthetical. This would connect forgiveness with *repentance* rather than *baptism*.⁶⁷ Baptism in water, with or without the ministries of the Word and the Holy Spirit, is not essential for forgiveness of sin. No water baptism has that kind of efficacy or power!

8. Water Used in a Spiritual Sense (Jn. 3:5): Jesus responded to Nicodemus, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:5). Concerning Jn. 3:5, 22-30, A. A. Hodge claimed that it “is declared that men must be born of water and of the Spirit, and that baptism as well as faith is an essential condition of salvation.”⁶⁸ However, Jn. 3:5 says nothing of water baptism. In fact, except for references concerning John the baptizer, there is no mention of water baptism anywhere in the Gospel of John. If baptism were efficacious for salvation in any sense, it seems like John and the Holy Spirit would certainly have said something about it in this book, especially in light of the purpose (Jn. 20:31) for which it was written. Other interpretations seem far more consistent with the totality of New Testament teaching: a) In this transitional time, possibly the water “refers to the repentance ministry of John the Baptist, and the Spirit refers to the application by the Holy Spirit...;”⁶⁹ b) The *water* may refer to natural birth in contrast to the spiritual birth from above; c) The *water* may be a symbol for the Holy Spirit, especially in light of John. 4:14 and 7:37-39; or d) The *water* may symbolize the Word of God as the washing agent in regeneration, especially in light of Ephesians 5:26 and Titus 3:5.
9. Baptism — Washing of Regeneration (Eph. 5:26; Titus 3:5): Paul speaks of “Christ... having cleansed her [the church] by the washing of water with the word...” (Eph. 5:26). He also speaks of Christ having “saved us... by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). Pedobaptists often refer to this “washing of water” and “washing of regeneration” as *water baptism*. Pratt states clearly that “Paul spoke of [water] baptism as ‘the washing of rebirth [or *regeneration*] and renewal by the Holy Spirit’ (Titus 3:5).”⁷⁰ But, if this *washing of regeneration* is really *water baptism*, then is this not very similar, if not the same, as “baptismal regeneration?” In Calvinism, regeneration by irresistible grace *precedes* faith. So baptism thus becomes the primary and essential condition for salvation. No wonder Pedobaptists refer to baptism as an “efficacious sacrament for salvation!” However, in the light of the biblical teaching of justification by grace alone through faith alone, the Reformed teaching that either Eph. 5:26 or Titus 3:5 speaks of water baptism must be rejected. The *washing*

⁶⁶ The last two times *eis* is used in this verse, it is normally only translated once, presumably because of a perceived unnecessary redundancy. Of course, in the transliterated text, *The NKJV Greek English Interlinear New Testament*, both of these two occurrences of *eis* are translated “in reference to.”

⁶⁷ Another interpretation, favored by some Greek scholars, has to do with contextual modifiers in the Greek syntax.

⁶⁸ A. A. Hodge, “Baptism.” http://www.the-highway.com/Baptism_Hodge.html

⁶⁹ Edwin A. Blum, “John,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 281.

⁷⁰ Pratt, “Baptism as a Sacrament of the Covenant.” According to Hodge, the biblical term, *regeneration*, as used in Titus 3:5 refers to a new birth or “the instantaneous change from spiritual death to spiritual life.” (Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 3, p. 5).

of water and the *washing of regeneration* is either a spiritual washing of the Word or a spiritual reference to the blood of Jesus, God's Son, which cleanses us believers from all sin (1 Jn. 1:7)! But what about Acts 22:16?

10. Baptism — Washing Away Sins (Acts 22:16): Ananias said to Paul, “Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16). By this time Paul was already saved during his encounter with Christ Himself on the road to Damascus. Paul claimed that he had received the Gospel, not by any man [including Ananias], but by Christ Himself through divine revelation (Gal. 1:11-12). Paul must have been a believer since he was so obviously submitted to the Lordship of Christ (Acts 9:4-5; 22:8-10). It sounds like Paul, no doubt as a believer, was even filled with the Spirit prior to his baptism (Acts 9:17-18). Whatever the meaning of the idiom, “calling on the name of the Lord” is something that only believers can do (Rom. 10:14a). It was only after these things happened in Paul's life that Ananias told Paul to be baptized no doubt as the God-given symbol of his regeneration and cleansing from sin by special revelation through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the Word of Christ.

F. THE CONCLUSION

Water baptism is simply a believer's act of obedience to Scripture. “Baptism visually identifies the baptized person as a believing member of the family of God. Baptism is the symbol of what has already occurred in the heart and life of one who has trusted Christ as Savior.”⁷¹ “Though water itself cannot save, baptism with water is a vivid symbol of the changed life of one who has a conscience at peace with God through faith in Christ.”⁷² Our faith, not our baptismal testimony, is the only basis for our position in Christ. The object of one's faith is crucial! We are saved by faith alone, not faith in baptism or faith in Christ-plus-baptism.

What has been quoted in this paper from Reformed sources certainly indicates that Pedobaptists generally believe that the sacraments, and especially baptism, are *efficacious means of grace for salvation*. But how can one so boldly claim that “baptism cleanses from sin” when he knows and teaches elsewhere that it is the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, that “cleanses us from all sin (1 Jn. 1:7)? It is only in Christ that “we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:14). That's because “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us [the ungodly, v. 6]” (Rom. 5:8). And “the one who... believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5). God Himself, the righteous judge, has declared us to be righteous by faith. That's justification! That's why we are saved. And this has nothing whatsoever to do with the so-called efficacy of any sacrament, including baptism. Baptism has never cleansed anyone from sin! Baptism is not *one of the conditions for salvation*! No one has ever been either *saved by baptism* or *saved by faith plus grace-by-baptism*. We believers have truly been saved *by grace* (as God's unmerited favor) alone through faith *alone* in the *scripture* (Gospel of Christ) *alone*.

Paul thanked God that he had baptized so few of the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:14-16). In fact he rightly claimed that he was never sent to baptize anyone, but to preach the Gospel (1 Cor. 1:17) of “the cross of Christ.” Why would he write such words, if baptism was in any way *efficacious for salvation* or *one of the conditions for salvation*? Paul wrote as he did because he was convinced that God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe it (1 Cor. 1:21). That's because the Gospel message itself is efficacious for salvation to any and

⁷¹ Roger M. Raymer, “1 Peter,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, NT Ed. (Wheaton IL: Victor Books, 1983) 852.

⁷² Quote from Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press) 1986 Ed., p. 1697, fn. 3:21.

everyone who believes it (Rom. 1:16). And water baptism has never been a part of the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:3-4) because it was never meant to be efficacious for the salvation of anyone!

SUPPLEMENTARY READING

ARTICLES:

- Bates, William H. “Baptism – Born of Water”
- Cocoris, G. Michael “Is Water Baptism Necessary for Salvation”
- Smetak, Larry “Baptism – The Relation of Faith and Baptism”