BAPTIZED *into* CHRIST



HERMAN HOEKSEMA

AN EXPOSITION OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

The Triple Knowledge

Volume 1 ***In the Midst of Death***

Volume 2 ***God's Way Out***

Volume 3 ***The Death of the Son of God***

Volume 4 ***The Lord of Glory***

Volume 5 ***Abundant Mercy***

Volume 6 ***Baptized into Christ***

Volume 7 ***Eating and Drinking Christ***

Volume 8 ***Love the Lord Thy God***

Volume 9 ***Love Thy Neighbor for God's Sake***

Volume 10 ***The Perfect Prayer***

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AN EXPOSITION OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

Second Edition



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HERMAN HOEKSEMA



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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

With gratitude to the God of our salvation, who thus far gave me strength and grace to continue my exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism, I hereby present to the reader the sixth volume of this work.

Although at first I conceived of the possibility of treating all the material that the Catechism offers under the heading “The Sacraments” in one volume, the attempt was soon abandoned. The question of the sacraments once more occupies an important place in theological thinking and discussion and, therefore, should not be dismissed lightly.

The reader will notice that, although I chose as the title of this volume *Baptized into Christ*, its content includes a discussion of the preaching of the word as a means of grace. My only excuse for this logical aberration is that I do not like long titles.

May our covenant God use these frail efforts to the instruction and strengthening of many in the faith of his everlasting covenant.

Herman Hoeksema
1951

FOREWORD

Baptized into Christ is the sixth volume in Herman Hoeksema's exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism, and it covers Lord's Days 25–27.

In answer to the inquiry of the Catechism in question 65 regarding the origin of faith, he begins with a general discussion of the means of grace, including a lengthy development of the concept "grace" in scripture. He explains how God uses the preaching of the word and the sacraments, the two means of grace, to work faith and all the blessings of salvation in the hearts of the elect.

The Catechism is very brief in its treatment of the preaching of the word, the primary means of grace by which the Holy Spirit works faith. Nevertheless, the author discusses at length the place and the function of the preaching as the chief means of grace, indispensable to faith in Christ and executed only by the church. In connection with the preaching, he includes a clarification of the doctrine of regeneration. He finishes this subject with a chapter on preaching in the sphere of the covenant.

Hoeksema then turns to the sacraments, the second of the two means of grace. He begins with a treatment of the sacraments in general and proceeds to the sacrament of baptism.

After demonstrating the doctrine of baptism from the Reformed confessions, he delineates its institution and meaning, showing that baptism is not merely a symbol, but it is also a sacrament of regeneration and renewal.

He then deals with the truth of infant baptism, finding its ground in the doctrine of the covenant established in the line of generations. He describes various erroneous views of the covenant before proving not only that the covenant is a relation of friendship between God and his people, but also that it is absolutely unconditional, the work of our sovereign God through Christ.

Mark H. Hoeksema

LORD'S DAY 25

Q. 65. Since then we are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits by faith only, whence doth this faith proceed?

A. From the Holy Ghost, who works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and confirms it by the use of the sacraments.

Q. 66. What are the sacraments?

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

Q. 67. Are both Word and sacraments, then, ordained and appointed for this end, that he may direct our faith to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?

A. Yes, indeed; for the Holy Ghost teaches us in the gospel, and assures us by the sacraments, that the whole of our salvation depends upon that one sacrifice of Christ which he offered for us on the cross.

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

A. Two, namely, holy baptism and the holy supper.

Chapter One



LORD'S DAY 25

The Means of Grace

The next seven Lord's Days of the Heidelberg Catechism are under the main heading "Of the Sacraments," but this title does not cover all the material treated under it. However, the sacraments receive most of the Catechism's attention. Lord's Day 25 defines the sacraments, explains their general significance, mentions the number of instituted sacraments and the preaching of the word, and presents preaching as the main means of grace. Lord's Day 26 explains the general significance of baptism and mentions the scriptural basis for its institution. Lord's Day 27 explains the sign of baptism in relation to its meaning as the washing of regeneration and the washing away of sins and adds a question and answer on the important doctrine of infant baptism. Then follow three lengthy Lord's Days on the following subjects: the significance and institution of the Lord's supper, the relation between the sign and the thing signified, a refutation of the error of transubstantiation, the difference between the popish mass and the Lord's supper, and the proper partakers of Lord's supper. Lord's Day 31 explains the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

In the composition of this section of the Catechism, the authors placed most of the emphasis on the sacraments. That these were the center of attention is plain from the *Schatboek*, the commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism written by Zacharias Ursinus.[1] To the preaching of the word and the sacraments together he devoted only two paragraphs, as follows:

> This question points out the connection which holds between the doctrine of faith and the sacraments. The Holy Ghost ordinarily produces faith…in us by the ecclesiastical ministry, which consists of two parts, *the word and the sacraments*. The Holy Ghost works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel; and cherishes, confirms, and seals it by the use of the

> sacraments. The word is a charter to which the sacraments are attached as signs. The charter is the gospel itself, to which the sacraments are affixed as the seals of the divine will. Whatever the word promises concerning our salvation through Christ, that the sacraments, as signs, and seals annexed thereto, confirm unto us more and more for the purpose of helping our infirmity. It is proper, therefore, that we should now speak of the sacraments, the seals of faith, appended to the gospel.
>
> Obj. But it is said that the Holy Ghost and the word produce faith in us, and that the sacraments strengthen it. In what, therefore, do these three differ from each other? Ans. They differ very much. 1. The Holy Ghost works and confirms faith in us as the efficient cause, whilst the word and sacraments do this as instrumental causes. 2. The Holy Ghost can also work faith independent of the word and the sacraments, whilst these, on the other hand, can effect nothing independent of the Holy Ghost. 3. The Holy Ghost works effectually in whomsoever he dwells, which cannot be said of the word and sacraments.[2]

Ursinus devoted half of a page to a discussion of the preaching of the word as a means of grace. In comparison Ursinus devoted the next one hundred pages of his commentary to a discussion of the sacraments. This emphasis must be explained from the controversy that our fathers had with Rome at the time of the Reformation—a controversy in which the doctrine of the sacraments occupied the center of attention.

We must not minimize the importance of the doctrine of the sacraments. The Romish church is still powerful and influential, and our controversy with it is perpetual. We also have a real and present controversy with many others outside of the Reformed faith. Many in our day deny the scriptural basis for infant baptism, while others contemptuously speak of water baptism against the baptism of the Holy Spirit and despise the sacraments as means of grace. Even in Reformed churches the sacraments repeatedly occupy a place of central importance in the discussions and interests of theologians. Witness the recent controversy and schism in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands over the parts or parties of the covenant of grace, the members of that covenant, presumptive regeneration, and what is sealed by the sacraments and to whom it is sealed.[3] In preaching on the Heidelberg Catechism, one should not quickly pass over the next six Lord’s Days or even combine more than one Lord’s Day in the same sermon. This would reveal ignorance regarding the fundamental questions involved.

However, it is true that the preaching of the word is not given its proper place

and attention in the Catechism. A more proper heading for the material treated in the seven Lord's days would undoubtedly be "The Distinguishing Marks of the True Church," but it is more in harmony with the subjective character of the Catechism as a book of comfort to treat the material under the general subject of the means of grace. This I propose to do.

Several questions must be asked and answered in this connection. What are means, and what are the means of grace? How is the preaching of the word a means of grace? Why is preaching, the administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of the keys of the kingdom of heaven the distinguishing marks of the true church?

Means are elements taken from the world of experience, from the outside world in which we live, and adapted to our human existence and nature. Food and drink are such elements that are so adapted to our nature that they can nourish and sustain our bodies. We call them means because God uses them for the purpose to which they are adapted. Things are nothing in themselves, but they exist and are sustained by the almighty and omnipresent power of God that we call providence. God is pleased to use these means always in the same way and for the same purpose. Bread always sustains and nourishes our bodies. God never uses bread to poison us. Because we have this confidence in God, we can use the means of bread. If God would use bread one day to poison us and another day to nourish us, it would be impossible to use that means. Because God always uses the means in the same way, we can use them.

The idea of means of grace is implied in answer 65 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which teaches that the Holy Ghost works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel and confirms it by the use of the sacraments. It is true that the Catechism speaks of the preaching of the word and the sacraments as a means of "faith" not as means of grace. Since faith is the bond of union with Christ and through faith and by faith we receive all the blessings of grace, it is perfectly proper to use the term *means of grace* as the church has always used it in this connection.

What is grace? As the word occurs in scripture it has many connotations, although they all refer to the same underlying idea.

The most general and basic idea of grace, from which all other connotations can be most readily explained, is pleasantness, attractiveness, beauty, gracefulness. In Proverbs 22:11 "grace" means pleasantness or beauty: "He that loveth pureness of heart, for the grace of his lips the king shall be his friend." A man speaks pleasant and agreeable words. His speech is graceful, and for the sake of it the king is his friend. The pleasantness and grace of his speech is not superficial, the vain beauty that characterizes the speech of the flatterer or the

boaster, but it is the beauty that expresses pureness of heart. Grace has an ethical meaning: it is rooted in goodness. It is ethically pure speech that is considered graceful and beautiful. The same meaning of beauty and attractiveness rooted in ethical goodness is in Psalm 45:2: “Thou art fairer than the children of men: grace is poured into thy lips: therefore God hath blessed thee for ever.”

In Proverbs 31:30 the meaning is outward gracefulness of bodily form, which in itself is deceitful and vain. This meaning is in harmony with the root meaning of the Hebrew word, which signifies “to incline gracefully toward one, to be pleasant toward someone,” and thus “to favor that one.”

The Greek word translated as “grace” in the New Testament is derived from a verb that means “to be pleasant” and thus “to afford joy,” even as a thing of beauty is a joy forever. It also has the fundamental idea of charm, gracefulness, attractiveness, and beauty. All who witnessed the Lord wondered at his gracious words, which undoubtedly means that the Lord’s speech was remarkably pleasant and beautiful and graceful in the true sense. The Lord was a charming speaker (Luke 4:22). The same significance of the word is in Colossians 4:6, where the apostle admonished the Christians that their speech must always be with grace, seasoned with salt, in order that they may know how they ought to answer every man. Their conversation, in other words, must always be characterized by the beauty of ethical purity. The same meaning is in Ephesians 4:29: “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.” Speech that gives grace or that is truly pleasant is opposed to corrupt communications. The apostle wrote in 1 Peter 2:20: “For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.” The word translated as “acceptable” literally means grace. The meaning, therefore, is that patience in suffering for the sake of righteousness is beautiful in the eyes of God.

On the basis of scripture, grace is the attribute, virtue, or quality of beauty or pleasantness or charm that is rooted in true goodness and purity and that is the expression of true perfection. Only what is truly good is truly beautiful, while all that is corrupt and imperfect must be condemned as ugly and repulsive. Only in the world of sin can the ethically corrupt be considered charming and attractive. In the sight of God and according to the judgment of scripture, it is never so presented.

In this general and fundamental sense grace is, first, an attribute of God. God is gracious. He is the God of all grace (1 Pet. 5:10). He is gracious in himself absolutely, that is, without any relation to the creature. Thus it is with all the attributes of the Most High. God is love in himself. He does not depend on the

existence of a creature who can be the recipient of his love in order actively to possess or to be this virtue. So God is merciful, righteous, holy, true, and faithful, the God of peace absolutely. If this were not so, he would not be God because he would not be self-existent and independent.

The same is true of the attribute of grace. God is eternally and in himself the God of all grace, apart from any relation to the creature. He *is* all grace. Graciousness is an attribute of his being, even if there never were a creature to whom this grace of God were revealed. Grace belongs to the name of God. Thus the Lord passed before Moses on the mount and proclaimed, "The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth" (Ex. 34:6). Thus the psalmist addressed God in Psalm 86:15, "Thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth." Thus the psalmist sang, "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy" (Ps. 103:8), and "Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; yea, our God is merciful" (Ps. 116:5).

This implies with respect to God that he is absolutely the perfection of all beauty, because he is the implication of an eternal, infinite perfection of all goodness. God is ethically good. Goodness is his being. He is a light, and there is no darkness in him at all. His being is righteousness, holiness, and truth. He is peace, love, and life. In him there is no unrighteousness, corruption, lie, war, envy, and hatred. He is goodness or ethical perfection in his being. For that reason God is also gracious in the sense of beautiful and charming, attractive and pleasant in his whole being, for true goodness is true beauty. These are supremely, absolutely, and infinitely in God: God is the perfection of beauty. As the ethically evil is ugly, so the ethically perfect is beautiful and charming. Grace in God is the perfection of his ethical beauty. "One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple" (Ps. 27:4). "In thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore" (Ps. 16:11). "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined" (Ps. 50:2). God is altogether lovely. He is absolute loveliness. All that is in God is charming, pleasant, and graceful.

As the perfectly lovely and beautiful one, God knows himself. He eternally beholds himself as beautiful. He has an eternal delight in his own beauty, for he is the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The Son is the Word, and in him the Father expresses all the goodness and beauty of his image. In the Spirit the Son returns to the Father, and the Father contemplates himself as the perfection of beauty. Hence God knows himself as gracious; he has a delight in the beauty of his perfection. Grace in God absolutely is the virtue of the divine being

according to which he is the perfection of beauty in himself and contemplates himself as such with infinite delight. The absolutely gracious God is graciously inclined toward himself and rejoices in himself with perfect joy.

Grace in scripture also means an attitude of graciousness or pleasantness, the gracious disposition of God to the creature. This is the meaning of the frequently occurring phrase “to find grace” in the eyes of God. Thus it occurs in Luke 1:30, where we read that the angel addressed the prospective mother of our Lord, “Fear not, Mary: for thou has found favour [grace] with God.” God was favorably inclined or graciously disposed toward Mary. In the same sense Stephen used the word, declaring that David “found favour [grace] before God, and desired to [raise] a tabernacle for the God of Jacob” (Acts 7:46). Of Paul and Barnabas we read that they “sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled” (Acts 14:26).

The meaning of grace that lives most generally and vividly in the mind of the church is undeserved and forfeited favor. This meaning is essentially the same as a friendly, gracious disposition, or the gracious attitude of God toward his people. Undeserved favor emphasizes and reveals the free and undeserved character of grace. The freedom and sovereignty of grace is emphasized by the state and condition of the subjects who receive and experience the grace of God. Grace is always free; it always has its basis only in God. But the freedom and independence of this favorable disposition of God is brought out more clearly and vividly when the recipient is a sinner who has forfeited every claim to the favor of God and deserves only his wrath and disfavor. Scripture opposes grace to debt or obligation and work. When anything is out of works or according to works, it is not of or according to grace, and vice versa. “To him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt” (Rom. 4:4). The wage-earner does not receive a token of the gracious disposition of his employer when he receives his wages. But we are justified freely by God’s grace through redemption in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:24). In our justification we have a manifestation of the free, gracious, and friendly disposition of God to us in and through Jesus Christ as our redeemer and savior. Thus “if [it is] by grace, it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, it is no more of grace: otherwise work is no more work” (Rom. 11:6). We have redemption through the blood of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, not according to works, which would be impossible, but according to the riches of his grace (Eph. 1:7). Grace is a friendly disposition, a favorable attitude of God toward his people in Christ Jesus that makes it possible for those who are entirely undeserving and who have wholly forfeited his kindness and favor to receive it.

Grace frequently occurs in scripture to denote the power of God whereby the sinner is actually saved and delivered from the bondage of sin and corruption, whereby he is regenerated and sanctified, and thus made pleasant in the sight of God, as well as all the spiritual blessings and virtues thus bestowed upon the objects of God's favor. Important in this connection is 1 Peter 5:10, where "grace" is used in its all-comprehensive sense: "But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you." That God is the God of all grace implies that he is gracious in himself; he is the all-gracious God; he is the sole source and author of all grace. Wherever you find grace, it is the grace of God. Apart from him there is no grace. He works it and bestows it as a manifestation of his gracefulness. In this sense the word occurs frequently in scripture. It has this connotation in the apostolic benediction: "Grace be to you," or "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you," which can only mean that God in his grace, through Jesus Christ, may graciously work in and upon believers and make them partakers of all the blessings of grace and salvation. When God is graciously inclined toward men, he blesses them and the content of that blessing is grace. Even as when he is displeased and unfavorably inclined to men, he curses, and the result is misery and death. By grace we are saved (Eph. 2:8). The apostle wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:10, "By the grace of God I am what I am," meaning that the power of God's grace made Paul what he was. Peter wrote, "Hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ," which refers to all the blessings of salvation that are showered upon the church in Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Pet. 1:13).

Grace in scripture also means thanks. The literal translation of "God be thanked" in Romans 6:17 is "grace be to God." "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" in Romans 7:25 is literally "grace be to God." The well-known doxology of 1 Corinthians 15:57 is literally "grace be to God, who giveth us the victory." The same expression is found in 2 Corinthians 2:14 and 9:15 and 2 Timothy 1:3. The meaning is that those who are the objects of and have experienced the power of God's grace ascribe grace to him so that he receives praise as the God of all grace.

Grace also has a subjective meaning. Through the means of the preaching of the word of God and the sacraments of holy baptism and the Lord's supper, the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts, effects within us the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and bestows upon us all the blessings of salvation.

Of these two means the preaching of the word is the more important, because it is indispensable. If need be the Christian can live without the sacraments, but never without the preaching of the word. Without the word of God he cannot

come to conscious faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He has no knowledge of him, and therefore cannot appropriate him by a true and living faith. Besides, the preaching of the word is not only the means whereby the Holy Spirit works faith within us, but it is also the main means for the strengthening, upbuilding, and sustaining of our faith. The sacraments also strengthen our faith, but differently because they are added to the word. Sacraments signify and seal the promise of God in the gospel, but it is chiefly through the word that we increase in the knowledge and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Upon the word the sacraments are dependent. Without the word they are meaningless and have no content. This would not be true if the Roman Catholic view of the sacraments were correct. According to that view the sacraments have power in themselves to work without the preaching of the word. Thus grace is not worked in the hearts of the believers by the Holy Spirit *through* the sacraments, but the sacraments *are* grace. Just as the theory of common grace proceeds from the idea that things in themselves are grace, so the Roman Catholic Church teaches that grace is in the sacraments. Baptism works regeneration, and in the Lord's supper we eat and drink Christ with our physical mouths. Then we do not need the preaching of the word, but we need the church and the priest as the dispensers of grace. In distinction from this the reformers and Protestants in general have always emphasized that the preaching of the word is the main means of grace, that it alone is indispensable, and that the sacraments are dependent on it. Therefore not the sacraments, but the preaching of the word should have the chief emphasis in the church.

Means in general are elements taken from the world of our experience that God always uses for the same purpose and end, means that we are able to use and to which we are bound. The same is true of the means of grace. The Bible is the inspired word of God and the revelation of the God of our salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord. This does not alter the fact that the Bible is a human book, manufactured of human material, written in human language, and adapted to human understanding. The preacher of the word is a man of like passions as we, with the same human intellect, who speaks in human voice and speech. The water in baptism and the bread and wine in the Lord's supper are elements from our world, and it pleases God by the Holy Spirit through these means to work grace in the hearts of his elect.

Because he always works the same thing through these means, he always makes the elect partakers of his grace. The church in which the means are instituted can administer them, and the individual believer can also employ them and is bound to their use. God uses the means of grace for the elect. They also have the opposite effect of grace and salvation in the hearts of men. The word is

not only a savor of life unto life, but also a savor of death unto death, and what is true of the word is also true of the sacraments. This does not alter the fact that both the preaching of the word and the sacraments are used by God as means to work faith and all the blessings of salvation in the hearts of the elect, and that therefore the church is able to administer them and the individual believers can use them.

In a sense all things are means of grace for the elect. The simple reading of the Bible can be used by the Holy Spirit to bring an elect to living faith in Christ. God can also use the conversations of believers among themselves or Bible discussions in societies as means of edification and the strengthening of faith. “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). The meaning is that all things work together for the salvation of the children of God. This is especially true of things that we consider evil in themselves: the temptations of the devil and of the world and of our flesh, the general sufferings of this present time, and especially the sufferings for Christ’s sake. That the Holy Spirit employs all things unto the salvation of the elect and to cause believers to grow in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is evident from other passages in the word of God. “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience (James 1:2–3).

1. Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:
2. By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.
3. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience;
4. And patience, experience; and experience, hope. (Rom. 5:1–4)
5. Kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.
6. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:
7. That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:
8. Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory:

9. Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet. 1:5–9)

These passages teach that in a sense all things are means of grace and that especially through tribulation and suffering God causes his people to grow in the true knowledge of Jesus Christ and in faith, hope, and love. Just as a young oak that is tossed by severe storms strikes its roots deeper into the ground, so by the grace of God tribulation and suffering cause the believer to strike his roots of faith deeper into Christ and thus to grow in grace.

Yet without the preaching of the word, which calls believers and through which they receive the knowledge of Christ, and the sacraments, which are added to the word of God as signs and seals of the promise, all of these other and general means have no meaning and effect. The means of grace are specifically those means that the Holy Spirit uses as they are officially instituted in the church, administered by her, received from her and through her, and used by the individual believers.

These means of grace are only two: the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments.

Preaching as a Means of Grace

The first and chief means of grace is the preaching of the word. It should be emphasized at once that the word of God must be *preached*, because only as the word is preached is it a means of grace.

Many either deny or completely ignore this truth and belittle the importance of preaching. They speak of the word or of the Bible as the means of grace, as did Herman Bavinck:

> Out of this affinity of the covenant of grace and the gospel, it follows…that grace is not dependent, as presented by the Romish church, on the institute of the church or priest and sacrament. The relation between scripture and the church is defined by the Protestants in an entirely different way than by the Roman Catholics. According to the latter, the church precedes the scriptures. The church is not built on holy scripture, but scripture proceeded out of the church. The existence of the church, therefore, does not need the scriptures; but the origin, collection, preservation, and explanation of the scriptures need the church.
>
> The Reformation, however, reversed this relation. She placed the church

> on the foundation of the scriptures and put the latter far above the church. Not the church, but the scriptures, the word of God, became the means of grace *par excellence*. Even the sacraments were subordinated to the word, and had no meaning or power without that word. But that word was able, therefore, to operate and did operate also without the institute of the church. It is true that God entrusted the word to his church to explain it, to preach it, and to defend it. But that word was not given to the church in such a way that without her it would have neither existence nor power.
>
> On the contrary, that word is directed to all men, and it has value in all circumstances and for all spheres of life. And it derives its power and operation by no means only from its being preached by an official person in the gathering of believers. It operates also when it is read and studied in the home, narrated by parents or teachers, and brought to the knowledge of men in whatever form. Everyone—who and what and wherever he be—who accepts that word in faith is a partaker of God's promise, of grace in Christ, and of the entire blessing of salvation. He does not need to wait for a church, a minister, or for the sacraments. Whoever believes has eternal life. [4]

It is true that the word as a means of grace is not dependent on the church, if church means the Roman Catholic Church, nor is salvation dependent on a Romish priest. The church is free to institute its own offices, but that does not alter the truth that the means of grace are given to the church. No Reformed man so belittles the institute of the church as to think or teach that he can partake of the sacraments, whether baptism or the Lord's supper, without the institute of the church in his own home or in any gathering of believers, nor is the preaching of the word a means of grace apart from the institute of the church.

It is true that the church is founded on the word of God, and that the word of God was first, and not the church. But it is not true that the Bible was before the church. Long before there was a Bible, there was preaching of the word of God. Preaching existed from the beginning of the world, as is evident in answer 19 of the Catechism. We know our Mediator from the holy gospel, which God first revealed in paradise, published by the patriarchs and prophets, represented by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law, and fulfilled by his only begotten Son.

For many centuries the church existed without a written word of God. For many more centuries only the Old Testament canon was gradually written and finally completed. For centuries afterward the church waited for the completion and closing of the New Testament canon, and then many more centuries elapsed

before the Bible was accessible to every believer. This had to wait for the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, for the general distribution of the Bible, and for the general education of the masses to enable them to read and write.

But always the church had the commission to preach the gospel, and always the preaching of the word was a means of grace.

The great importance of preaching and of the preacher is expressed in Romans 10:14–15: “How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent?”

It is well, especially in our day, to emphasize the importance of the preacher and his mission, for our age is characterized by gross ignorance of fundamental truths and the nature and importance of preaching are very little understood. Today everybody preaches except those whose specific calling it is. Many who call themselves ministers of the divine word are unfaithful to their calling, and instead of preaching the word of God they lecture on sundry subjects. Today many pretend to preach without a mission and utterly disregard the truth that one cannot preach unless he is sent. Not only men, but also women and children preach. Societies, institutes, and other groups that exist and operate apart from the church prepare and send out preachers. One of the chief purposes many of these preachers seem to have is to draw a crowd. In some churches when the fountains of sensationalism in the preachers run dry, these churches employ other preachers to draw a crowd and to create that temporary stir of religious emotion called a revival. These preachers advertise themselves in the local papers and announce the strangest topics as the themes of their sermons. Sometimes they offer a more entertaining show than the theaters and accompany their philippics by the wildest gesticulations and even perform acrobatic stunts worthy of a circus. They one and all hawk the Christ as though he were the cheapest article on the market. The fruit of their labors is a wave of sensationalism that passes as quickly as it was aroused. When many people speak of a “nice sermon,” they mean not at all a sermon that brought the word of God and was a means of grace to them, but one that for approximately forty minutes entertained them and played on their emotions.

Hence it is not at all superfluous to ask, what is preaching and what is a preacher in the biblical sense?

Preaching is the authoritative proclamation of the gospel by the church in the service of the word of God through Christ. There are four elements in this definition. First, preaching is authoritative proclamation: the preacher must be sent; second, preaching is proclamation of the gospel, the whole word of God as

it is revealed in Christ; third, preaching is by the church, for only the church is able to send the preacher; and fourth, preaching is in the service of the word of God through Christ, for only Christ through the Spirit can make preaching of the word powerful and efficacious as a means of grace.

The last element of the definition is most important and fundamental in the preaching of the word. Through the preaching it pleases God through Christ, the exalted Lord, the chief prophet of God, who alone gathers his church, to speak to his people unto salvation. This is plainly expressed in Romans 10:14–15. However, in the King James translation there is a small, but significant mistake that was corrected in the English Revised Version of 1881. The King James Version has "how shall they believe in him *of whom* they have not heard?" while the Revised Version has "how shall they believe in him *whom* they have not heard?" The King James translators evidently misunderstood that the genitive of the relative pronoun in Greek is the direct object of the verb translated as "have…heard." The proper translation is not "of whom they have not heard" but "whom they have not heard." The difference is important, because when you hear *of* someone, he is not present; you do not hear his voice, but the voice of someone else who tells you something about him. But when you hear someone, you hear his voice, for he is present with you; he addresses you. Thus the difference in the translation is significant, though it concerns only one little word. In the King James Version verse 14 asserts in question form that it is impossible to believe in Christ unless we have heard about him. This is true, but it does not convey the full meaning of the text. The verse in the English Revised Version teaches that you cannot believe in Christ unless you hear Christ speak to you, unless you hear Christ address his word to you.

This meaning of Romans 10:14 harmonizes with other parts of scripture. The Lord said in John 5:24–25, "I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life…The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live." Of his sheep, whom the Father has given him, the Lord said, "To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice; and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth forth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:3–4, 27).

The word of man is insufficient as a basis for that certain knowledge whereby we know that all our sins are forgiven and for that perfect confidence whereby we rely in life and death on our faithful savior Jesus Christ. We must hear "the word of God [that] is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged

sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do" (Heb. 4:12–13).

How will they hear this word unless they hear the voice of Christ? And how can they hear this word without the preacher? This is the point of Romans 10:14–15. Anyone can tell you about Jesus, his words and works, the cross and the atonement, and the resurrection and justification. To be a witness of Christ is certainly our calling. The Christian must be a witness for Christ in the world, must confess and extol his name and tell others about him. But this does not make anyone a preacher, for a preacher is not a person who speaks concerning Christ. A preacher is one through whom it pleases Christ himself to speak and to cause his voice to be heard by his people. What matters in any sermon is that we hear the voice of Jesus say, "Come unto me and rest and repent and believe" and that his voice resounds in the depths of our souls, "Your sins are forgiven, and I give unto you eternal life."

Christ is *the* officebearer in God's house. He must build the house, not we. The task of gathering his people is committed to him. It is and remains his task; never can it be man's task. Although it pleases Christ to gather his flock and to build his church through men, who are coworkers with him, the work remains his. All that is man's work and not the work of Christ will be burned. When it pleases the Lord Jesus Christ to gather his flock and to cause his voice to be heard, so that his sheep hear it and follow him, and when it pleases him to do this through a man, only then is there a preacher. In the consciousness of being such a preacher, the apostle wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:20: "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God."

The content of the preacher's message, which he brings to the church or to any audience in the heathen world, may never be anything else than the word of Christ, for the Lord will not speak through anything but his own word. He gave his word directly to the apostles, as Paul declared in 2 Corinthians 5:19: "[God… in Christ] hath committed unto us [posited in us] the word of reconciliation." By putting his word in the apostles, Christ made preachers out of them. Just as an ambassador, who delivers a message from one government to another, takes the word of his government with him, so Christ gave his word to the apostles, and this same word of Christ is committed unto the church in the holy scriptures.

Preaching as to its content is strictly limited to the word of Christ in the Bible. The preacher has strictly nothing of his own to deliver. Whenever he delivers a message of his own, apart from the word of Christ, he ceases to be a preacher. If

an ambassador to a foreign government has a definite commission and a definite message from his government to deliver, and after having delivered it begins to express his views and opinions on the matter in question, he cannot do so in his capacity as ambassador. The same is true of the preacher. In the measure that he goes outside of the word of God, he ceases to be a preacher.

This can be applied to modern, social and political preaching. Many preachers today use pulpits to express their views on various social, economic, and political issues. When you listen to one of these men, perhaps you hear a well-worked-out lecture on a certain topic. Often the attempt is very amateurish, and you may agree or disagree with the speaker, but the man is not a preacher. If he offers his social or political views under the pretext of his being a minister of the word of God, he is a deceiver too, for a preacher has nothing else than the word of Christ to bring. Although the word of Christ may shed light upon the calling of a Christian with respect to his social and political life, a lecture on a social or political topic is not preaching.

Moreover, a preacher must bring the word of Christ concerning Christ. Jesus Christ as the revelation of the God of salvation is the central theme of all preaching. Hence the apostle speaks in Romans 10:15 of the preacher who brings the gospel of peace and the glad tidings of good things. The preacher must bring the word of Christ; the gospel of God concerning his Son; the word of faith; the word that God through Christ has blotted out the handwriting of sin against us, has reconciled us unto himself, and has justified us in Christ; the glad tidings of good things, such as the forgiveness of sins, the adoption unto children and heirs, the deliverance by almighty grace from the bonds of sin and the dominion of death, regeneration, sanctification, and the hope of eternal life and glory. The minister may preach that word of Christ from different angles, in many different ways, and with application to different phases and spheres of life. He may cause the light of the word of Christ concerning himself as the God of our salvation to shine upon the Christian’s calling and attitude regarding peace and war, prosperity and adversity, sickness and health, fruitful and barren years, life and death, the home and society, and church and state. He must preach the whole counsel of God, but always it must be the word of God in Christ concerning himself, the glad tidings of good things, that he preaches.

This implies that the word of the preacher must be authoritative, because preaching is authoritative proclamation of the gospel. The Greek word for preaching means “to speak as a herald.” The preacher must bring Christ’s message, nothing more, and he must deliver it in the name of Christ and with authority. He must clearly leave the impression that the audience is under obligation to hear and to do the preached word, that they and he together must

bow before that word because it is the authoritative word of Christ. He must not say, “Now listen. This is my opinion, and I will show you why.” Nor must he beg his audience, “Will you please agree with me and accept what I say?” He must say, “Thus saith the Lord!” A preacher is an ambassador, and as such he must speak. No false show of humility or fear of men may keep him from addressing his audience with authority, provided he brings the word of Christ and nothing else. Pride and conceit it is to bring with authority his own word or the philosophies of men. Man’s word has no power or authority. Conceit too it is for a preacher not to include himself in his message, for he is a sinful man. If he stands in the consciousness of his calling and brings the word of Christ, it is humble and fearless obedience when he brings his message with authority.

The fruit of preaching—and it is well that the minister of the word remembers this—depends solely on Christ who speaks through the sermon. No preacher must leave the impression in his preaching that the fruit depends on his efforts, on his convincing words of wisdom, on his playing on the emotions and his power to move the audience to tears or to make them tremble with fear of damnation. The altar call that is delivered after the sermon and apart from the text is a great evil. It is a strong and prolonged play on the emotions, often accompanied by a soft strain of music and a few appropriate hymns. Always the altar call consists of presenting Jesus as a poor beggar, who would fain save a few souls if they will only come to him before it is too late. Always it consists of hawking Jesus in its worst form.

This travesty on true preaching always impresses me as being a burlesque caricature of the apostles’ preaching. Will he who declared, “No man can come unto me, except the Father draw him” and “All that the Father giveth unto me shall come unto me,” speak and cause his voice to be heard through such a travesty on preaching, through such burlesque presentations of himself? God forbid! I do not hesitate to say that this is not preaching. There are several examples of preaching in the holy scriptures. The prophets of the old dispensation preached. Christ delivered discourses when he sojourned among us. The apostles went into all the world and preached the gospel to every creature. But in vain one looks for any indication in all their preaching that they hawked the Savior and played upon the emotions of men, as is done in the modern altar call.

A preacher may apply all his God-given powers and talents to the preparation and delivery of his message, and he should, for the word that he preaches is worthy of his best. But he must be fully conscious that the fruit of his preaching is the work not of himself, but of Christ, and it must become clearly evident in the form of his preaching that he expects nothing of self, but all from Christ.

Only the church is authorized to preach, and it is essential that a preacher be sent. This is true of all preachers, whether they proclaim the word of God in the established church or preach the gospel of peace in the heathen world. In the strict sense all preachers are missionaries: they must be sent. This is emphasized in Romans 10:15: “How shall they preach except they be sent?” The sending is indispensable to the preaching; without it preaching is impossible. One can witness for Christ, answer anyone who asks him a reason for the hope that is in him, confess his faith, or tell others about Christ. But one cannot preach unless he is sent.

This indispensable requisite of the sending is easily understood when we understand that preaching is the *authoritative* delivering of the word of Christ, the gospel of peace, the glad tidings of good things, the vehicle upon which it pleases Christ to carry his word to his people. Two men can say virtually the same thing, yet there can be a wide difference between the power, authority, and significance of their words. Suppose that two men in Washington, DC, know the United States government will declare war against another country. Both men are equally well-informed, because they received their information directly from the president. One of the men is officially appointed to bring in person or in writing the declaration of war to the government of the country against which war will be declared. Suppose that the other man travels to the foreign country against which the United States will declare war, and he spreads the news and even informs the government about the declaration of war before the ambassador arrives to deliver the official declaration. The message of the unofficial informant has no power beyond mere information. Only the official word by the officially appointed ambassador has power. Even though the other man spoke the truth, his word had no authority and did not change the state of things, because he was not officially sent. Thus it is also with the preacher. The preacher is one who brings the authoritative word of Christ, because he is sent by the church.

The Reformed fathers always distinguished between speaking an edifying word from the scriptures and official preaching. Any Christian may speak an edifying word, but in order to preach one must be sent. To be sent implies, first, that one receives the official commission from Christ to speak his word, the gospel of peace, and to proclaim the glad tidings of salvation. It implies, second, the promise that Christ will be with the preacher and empower him by his Spirit to preach, and that he will surely speak his irresistible word through the ministry of the one who is sent. To be sent implies, third, that Christ sends not only whomsoever he will but also whithersoever it pleases him, as stated in the Canons of Dordt.

> Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of his good pleasure sends the gospel.[5]

For these reasons preaching is properly the word of the church alone.

How is a preacher sent, and how can one be sure that Christ has commissioned him to preach the gospel of peace?

With respect to the apostles these questions can easily be answered. Their name expresses that they were sent. They received their calling and commission through Christ directly and in person. The chief distinguishing mark of an apostle was that he was directly and immediately called by the Lord, which Paul emphasized in Galatians 1:1: “Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead).” The apostles received their commissions to preach from Christ’s own lips. They had the promise of the Spirit. Christ put his word in them, and he sent them whithersoever he would, the Spirit leading them and sometimes preventing them from going to one place and directing them to another. With respect to the sending of the apostles there is no difficulty. They had their commission directly from the Lord.

What about one who serves in the ministry of the divine word today in either the heathen world or in a local church? Also today Christ sends preachers. His sending of preachers is no longer direct and immediate, as with the apostles. It is well for anyone who desires to serve the Lord in the ministry to understand this. A mere desire to become a preacher, even though this desire gradually develops into a conviction that one is called by the Lord, is insufficient. Occasionally it happens that a man with an inward desire and conviction attempts in different ways to enter the ministry and become a preacher, and if he fails to find a place and receive a call in the regular way, he still insists that he is called on the ground of his inward desire and conviction. This is a mistake. If a man acts on that mistake and tries to arrange a place for himself as a preacher, as is frequently done in such cases, he sins, and he surely will never be a preacher. A preacher must be sent, and Christ sends no man directly, either by an immediate and special revelation or by creating in one’s heart the conviction that he is called.

Nevertheless, the sending of a preacher is just as real and peremptory as it was with the apostles, although the way of sending is now different. When he was about to be taken up into heaven, Christ gave to his church the commission to

preach. “Go ye into all the world and, preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). He addressed the apostles directly when he spoke these words.

However, this commission to preach the gospel cannot be limited to the apostles. It was given to them as representatives of the New Testament church and must be extended to the church until the end of the world. This is evident because the apostles personally could not fulfill the task of preaching the gospel in the whole world. Nor can the Lord’s promise, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matt. 28:20), be limited to the lifetimes of the apostles. Neither can it be said that this commission was given to believers individually, for the apostles were the representatives of the church. To the church of the New Testament in the world the Lord addressed the command to preach the gospel. To the church as the pillar and ground of the truth the Lord entrusted his word. That church must keep the word, receive it, interpret it, confess it, and preach it. She has the commission authoritatively to speak the word of Christ, and the Spirit’s promise to lead her into all the truth was fulfilled in her.

This should be emphasized today. Not the individual believer, apart from the church of Christ in the world, and not societies, boards, sects, movements, or groups of believers are the pillar and ground of the truth and have the commission to preach the word. Whatever influences for good such groups extraneous from the church may seem to have, their existence and labor and separation from the church are disobedience, and the ultimate effect of their work can only be detrimental to the cause of the truth.

Only the church has the commission to preach.

It is not difficult to see that this commission to preach the word of Christ must be fulfilled by the church institute and therefore through its ministry. Christ gave to some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–12). Through the ministry the church carries out the commission she has received to preach the gospel. Not the person of the minister has the commission to preach, but the church, and she fulfills her task through the ministry. Hence only they whom the church separates to this ministry can properly feel that they are sent by Christ. This calling by the church is the all-important factor in the determination of one’s being sent by Christ to preach the gospel. Only when a man is so called by the church to stand in the position of the instituted ministry, and when in that position he strictly adheres in all he delivers to the word of God as revealed in the scriptures, can he rightfully claim to be a preacher.

This preaching is meant when we say that the word is a means of grace. That

this is true is plain from the question of Romans 10:14: “And how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard?”

The preaching of the word is indispensable to faith in Christ. This does not minimize the value of all the means of instruction in the truth that we possess today. It also does not underrate the great significance of Bible reading and Bible study in the home by individual believers and by societies. We believe in the perspicuity of holy scripture and that all believers have the unction of the Holy One. Yet all these means cannot and may never be separated from the work of Christ through the church as institute, especially through the ministry of the word. Suppose there had been no ministry, no official preaching of the word through all the ages of the new dispensation. Would there be the Bible translated into every language? Would we have the confessions to preserve the truth from generation to generation? Would we have commentaries and other books that interpret scripture? Would there be faithful fathers and mothers to instruct their children in the truth from childhood? They would not be at all. You can see what becomes of the man, woman, and family who separate from the church, proudly ignoring the word of God that it is impossible to hear without a preacher, and claiming to hear Christ just as well by reading the Bible at home. Before long they will stray from the truth and will be lost in the world. Therefore the official preaching by the church is of central importance. It is just as true today for the church of Christ as it was during the time of the apostles that the preaching of the word is the main means of grace.

Immediate Regeneration

The question now arises, is all grace, as it is applied to the elect and wrought in their hearts, mediate? That is, does the Holy Spirit always work through the means of the preaching of the word and of the sacraments, or is the beginning of this marvelous work an immediate work of the Holy Spirit?

The Heidelberg Catechism does not decide this question, but in question and answer 65 it simply inquires into the origin of saving faith. Saving faith proceeds from the Holy Ghost, who works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel and confirms it by the use of the sacraments. In what sense must faith be understood in this questions and answer? Does the Catechism refer there to the power, or faculty, of faith, as it is implanted in the hearts of the elect at the moment of regeneration and as it also can be present in the hearts of little children? Or does the Catechism have in mind the act of conscious faith?

The answer of Abraham Kuyper is that the Heidelberg Catechism refers to

both the power of faith and active belief.

> If we say that what is meant is only the conscious and active faith, one gets stuck with the sacraments: for in that case the sacrament of holy baptism cannot possibly strengthen such a faith, considering that the Catechism defends infant baptism, for the evident reason that such an active and conscious faith cannot yet be present in a little child that is just born…If we say that by faith is meant not conscious, but unconscious faith, not faith that already actively revealed itself, but the implanted power of faith, it cannot be applied to what is said of the preaching of the gospel. For…children that were just born neither hear nor understand the proclamation of the gospel. [6]

Kuyper concluded that the Heidelberg Catechism in question and answer 65 refers to the power, or faculty, of faith and to conscious belief in Christ. He would paraphrase the question and answer as follows: “Whence does this faith proceed? From the Holy Spirit, who implants in us the power of faith in regeneration and brings it to conscious faith through the preaching of the gospel, who confirms the implanted power of faith through the sacrament of baptism and strengthens conscious faith by the sacrament of the Lord’s supper.” However, although this invention is ingenious, the explanation is farfetched. It is more than questionable whether this distinction was before the minds of the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Must question and answer 65 be explained as meaning that the whole of faith —the faculty, or power, of faith and conscious belief in Christ, regeneration included—is wrought by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the word, or does the Catechism refer only to conscious faith? That is, is regeneration mediate or immediate?

About these questions there has been and still are differing opinions in the Reformed churches. Some insist that all grace as it is applied to the sinner by the Holy Spirit, including regeneration, is mediate. That is, the Holy Spirit always works through the means of the preaching of the gospel. For them the soteriological order of the various steps in the application of salvation to the heart of the elect begins with the calling. The preaching of the word is necessarily first. Others strongly oppose this view and insist that regeneration is first and immediate.

The differences can be reduced to a minimum. All Reformed theologians emphasize that the sinner by nature is completely dead in sin and misery, that he is so blind that he cannot see the things of the kingdom of God, that by nature he

is so deaf that he cannot spiritually hear and understand the truth of the gospel, and that his heart is so filled with enmity against God and his Christ that he will never come and embrace the Christ of the scriptures. They one and all oppose the Arminian doctrine that regeneration is effected by the external preaching of the gospel, by moral persuasion. All emphasize that regeneration is wholly a powerful and efficacious work of the Holy Spirit without the will of man. They all admit that logically regeneration is a work of the Holy Spirit that precedes all other works of grace: the opening of the eyes to see and the ears to hear and the implanting of the seed of the new life in the heart of the elect. Whether we maintain that regeneration takes place through the preaching of the gospel or not, it is certain that all Reformed theologians, unless they want to swing over to the Arminian camp, must admit that in a sense regeneration is always immediate, for logically it always precedes every other work of grace in the heart of the sinner.

This is plain from the description of the work of regeneration by the Holy Spirit in the Canons.

> But when God accomplishes his good pleasure in the elect, or works in them true conversion, he not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them, and powerfully illuminates their minds by his Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God; but by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit pervades the inmost recesses of the man; he opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised, infuses new qualities into the will, which though heretofore dead, he quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, he renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree it may bring forth the fruits of good actions.[7]

> And this is the regeneration so highly celebrated in Scripture and denominated a new creation: a resurrection from the dead, a making alive, which God works in us without our aid. But this is in no wise effected merely by the external preaching of the gospel, by moral suasion, or such a mode of operation that after God has performed his part it still remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not, to be converted or to continue unconverted; but it is evidently a supernatural work, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable; not inferior in efficacy to creation or the resurrection from the dead, as the Scripture inspired by the Author of this work declares; so that all in whose heart God works in this marvelous manner are certainly, infallibly, and

> effectually regenerated and do actually believe. Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence becomes itself active. Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent by virtue of that grace received.[8]

The Canons do not teach that regeneration—which they call “a new creation” and compare to “a resurrection from the dead” and that God works without our aid and that is not effected merely by the external preaching of the gospel—is wrought in us through the means of the preaching of the word. This marvelous regeneration, when it is effected and accomplished in the heart of the sinner, does not exclude but requires the use of means. Yet this does not imply that regeneration is mediate and is accomplished through the preaching of the gospel. This is also taught in the Canons.

> As the almighty operation of God whereby he prolongs and supports this our natural life does not exclude, but requires, the use of means, by which God of his infinite mercy and goodness hath chosen to exert his influence, so also the before mentioned supernatural operation of God by which we are regenerated in no wise excludes or subverts the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and food of the soul. Wherefore, as the apostles and teachers who succeeded them piously instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to his glory, and the abasement of all pride, and in the meantime, however, neglected not to keep them by the sacred precepts of the gospel in the exercise of the Word, sacraments, and discipline; so, even to this day, be it far from either instructors or instructed to presume to tempt God in the church by separating what he of his good pleasure hath most intimately joined together. For grace is conferred by means of admonitions; and the more readily we perform our duty, the more eminent usually is this blessing of God working in us, and the more directly is his work advanced; to whom alone all the glory, both of means and of their saving fruit and efficacy, is forever due. Amen.[9]

Although in this article the gospel is called the “seed of regeneration,” it is plain from the description of rebirth in these articles in the Canons that the meaning is not that the preaching of the gospel is the means through which the Holy Spirit effects regeneration in the narrowest sense. Regeneration is called a new creation and is the same as the resurrection from the dead. This implies that as creation is an immediate work of God and resurrection is effected by the

almighty power of God without any human means, so also the origin of the new life—regeneration or the rebirth—is accomplished directly by the power of God and not through the preaching of the gospel. As the sustenance and the prolongation of natural life requires means, by which God in his infinite mercy and goodness has chosen to exert his influence, in the same way the new life, which is immediately created in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, requires the means of the preaching of the gospel as "the seed of regeneration" to cause it to flourish into conscious faith in Christ, to sustain, to strengthen, and to nourish it.

That this is the view of all Reformed theologians and of the Reformed confessions is shown by Herman Bavinck, although he seemed to be inclined toward the view that regeneration somehow is connected with the preaching of the word.

> Although joined with the external call through the gospel, this grace (of regeneration) is nevertheless not shut up in the word of the gospel, but it penetrates into the heart of man, touches him in his most secret being immediately and renews him without his knowledge and will in principle according to the image of God. It is absolutely independent of any consent of the mind or of any act of the free will of man. Nothing intervenes between this operation of grace and man as he is regenerated: no word, no sacrament, no church, no priest, no act of the intellect or of the will. The Holy Spirit works in the heart of the elect the grace of regeneration (of faith, of conversion, or however one may call this first moment) directly and immediately, irresistibly.
>
> To adduce proofs from Reformed theology for this truth may be deemed superfluous. Anyone can find them with every Reformed writer about the internal calling and in every Reformed symbol. It is true that the internal calling, or regeneration, or the gifts of faith, is seldom called immediate. Almost without exception theologians confine themselves to circumscribe this work as efficacious, irresistible, and nevertheless most delightful. Nevertheless, there is not the least doubt that the grace that works the very first principle of the new life in the heart of the sinner may be called immediate in the sense that, whether joined with the word or not, it works in man directly without intervention and without being dependent upon man's intellectual consent or an act of the free will of man.[10]

Bavinck wrote further:

> That is the judgment which the Synod of Dordt placed over against the

sentiment of the Remonstrants. A prevenient, moral, persuasive grace is altogether insufficient to bring man to faith and conversion. To the power which is exercised by the word must be added another, internal, hidden work of the Holy Spirit by which is granted, first, the power of faith and of conversion, and which, second, translates with infallible certainty that power into the act of faith and conversion.

This operation of the Holy Spirit is being circumscribed in different ways, by the Synod of Dordt and the different foreign and native delegates. It is called an internal, hidden, mysterious, powerful, efficacious, supernatural, almighty, unconquerable, irresistible, gracious, and delightful grace.

But the term *immediate grace* or *immediate regeneration* was not used. It is indeed used…by some Reformed theologians. And, understood in a good sense, this circumscription is not to be disapproved. But it was probably intentionally avoided by the Synod of Dordt and by many theologians because it could easily lead to misunderstanding and be used in favor of a certain objection of the Remonstrants….

It is nevertheless established that according to Reformed doctrine the Holy Spirit does not work faith and regeneration in man in such a way that he remains bound to the means of grace or works through them. On the contrary, he penetrates into the most secret recesses of the heart of man. He opens the closed heart; he works the quickening within us without us; he comes to dwell in man with his divine power and infuses into the mind, the will, and the inclinations new properties, so that the darkness, the unwillingness, and the unrighteousness are removed and replaced by enlightenment, willingness, and uprightness…

There may be differences of opinion about whether this operation of the Spirit can be called *immediate* without misunderstanding. But about the matter itself all difference is excluded. It touches the heart of Reformed theology, the very marrow of holy scripture in respect to the doctrine of the application of salvation.[11]

That regeneration in this sense is immediate and logically precedes all other works of grace in the hearts of the elect is clearly taught by the word of God. A few passages will be sufficient to substantiate this statement.

> 3. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.
>
> 4. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old?

> can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?
>
> 5. Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.
>
> 6. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
>
> 7. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.
>
> 8. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. (John 3:3–8)

The Greek word translated as “born again” means born again and born from above. One who is born again differs from the natural man not only spiritually and ethically, so that he is changed from sin unto righteousness, from corruption unto holiness, and from enmity against God unto the love of God; but also the regenerated man differs from the natural man in being heavenly and setting his heart on the things above, while the natural man is earthly and seeks earthly things.

A few things in John 3:3–8 are especially worthy of attention regarding efficacious and immediate regeneration. The Lord said to Nicodemus, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” This implies that the grace of regeneration is first and must have precedence over any other work of grace wrought by the Holy Spirit in the heart of man. Without regeneration he cannot even see the kingdom of God. He has no contact whatsoever with spiritual things.

Further, “water” in verse 5 can refer only to the water of baptism, for the baptism of John must have been well-known to Nicodemus. To be born of water means to be justified and to have the forgiveness of sins. A man must be objectively justified before God before he even has a right to regeneration. To be born of the Spirit refers to the new birth, without which a man cannot even see the kingdom of God. This rebirth by the Holy Spirit is presented as immediate. A man who is reborn is born not through the gospel, but by the Spirit.

The same truth is evident from verse 6: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Also here mediate regeneration by the preaching of the gospel is completely left out of consideration. This is expressed once more in verse 8, where the Lord compared one born of the Spirit with the wind that blows where it lists and that one cannot tell whence it comes and whither it goes. The second birth, or the birth from above, is mysterious in its origin. One who is conscious of the operation of the

Spirit and the workings of the new birth in his heart begins to see the kingdom of God, to hear the preaching of the gospel, and to seek the things above. But why he is thus spiritually affected he cannot explain. It is simply the mystery of being born of the Spirit. All these elements in the text plainly emphasize that regeneration in its deepest sense is immediate; it is not wrought through the preaching of the gospel.

The same truth is taught in John 5:24–25: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life…The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live." The Lord taught here that one who hears Christ's word already has eternal life. Eternal life precedes the hearing. To have eternal life in principle is the same as to be regenerated. Regeneration therefore precedes the hearing of the word of Christ. This is corroborated by the last part of verse 24, which says that one who hears the word of Christ "is passed" from death unto life. This hearing of the word of the Savior refers to the word of the gospel. The true, spiritual hearing of the gospel is presented in these verses as proof that one has eternal life or that he is regenerated. One must be reborn before he can even hear the word of the gospel. This is in accord with John 3:3, which says that one cannot "see" the kingdom of God, except he is born again. Seeing the kingdom presupposes regeneration and hearing the word of the gospel presupposes the rebirth. This is emphasized in John 5:25, where regeneration is presented as resurrection from the dead, which is immediate. That this rebirth, or resurrection, does not take place through the word of the gospel is evident from the rest of the verse, which speaks of hearing the voice of the Son of God and the living of those who hear. This voice of the Son of God is not the preaching of the gospel, but the causal, creative word of God by which regeneration is immediately effected.

First Peter 1:23–25 also teaches the truth that regeneration in its first beginning is an immediate work of the Holy Spirit.

> 23. Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever.
>
> 24. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away:
>
> 25. But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.

This passage is often quoted as favoring mediate regeneration. Does not the

apostle plainly refer to the word of God through which we are reborn as “the word which by the gospel is preached unto you”? Some argue that it is plain from these verses that regeneration is wrought through the means of the preaching of the gospel.

However, such an interpretation fails to distinguish properly and sharply between the different concepts of the text. Especially important are the two prepositions “of” and “by.” These two prepositions are better literally translated by “out of” (*ek*) and “through” (*dia*). We are regenerated out of incorruptible seed and through the word of God that lives and abides forever. Regeneration is presented as developing out of a seed. This seed is the new principle of life immediately implanted in the heart by the Holy Spirit. It is wrought in the heart not only without man’s will or effort, but even without his consciousness. It takes place *through* the word of God. What does this mean? Not the preaching of the gospel, for these verses describe this word of God as living, abiding, and enduring forever. It cannot be said of scripture or of the preaching of the gospel that they live and endure forever. It is therefore the causal, creative word of God that is wrought efficaciously in the heart, opening it, as in the case of Lydia, to hear the word of truth. The apostle wrote that this living and abiding and ever-enduring word of God is preached to men.

There are three stages in the whole work of regeneration. First, there is the seed that the Holy Spirit plants immediately in the heart. Second, there is the word of God, living and abiding forever, by which the seed of regeneration develops into the new birth. Third, there is the preaching of the gospel, through which men are externally called and brought to consciousness through the power of the same living and abiding word of God.

The same truth of immediate regeneration is taught in the parable of the sower. This passage frequently is adduced as a proof of mediate regeneration. The seed, so it is said, is the word preached, for in his own explanation of the parable, the Lord said that “the seed is the word of God” (Luke 8:11). Hence the word preached is the seed of regeneration.

Careful distinctions are necessary to understand the true meaning of the parable in this respect. If regeneration means the first development of the new life into conscious activity, there is no objection to the explanation that the seed is the word of God. But the parable teaches that this is not the whole work of regeneration. The seed of the word of God falls on three different kinds of spiritual soil without bringing forth proper fruit: the soils represented by the wayside, rocky ground, and the thorny ground. Only those represented by the good ground “are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15).

The soil in nature is not prepared *by* the seed but *for* the seed. The preparation of the soil is entirely independent of the action of the sowing. This is no less true spiritually. The heart is not prepared *by* the gospel but *for* the gospel and independently of its preaching, that is, by the direct and immediate work of the Holy Spirit in the heart.

When regeneration is distinguished as a seed and its development, as the generation and birth of the new life, the distinction is logical rather than temporal. We cannot agree with the view that the seed of regeneration can lie dormant in the heart for many years before it sprouts into conscious and active life. Some claim that it is possible for a man who has the seed of regeneration in his heart to live in sin and iniquity while he is under the influence of the gospel. Yet he does not have any living part with the gospel and is unable to see the things of the kingdom of God. He can continue in this state for forty, fifty, or sixty years with the seed of regeneration in his heart. Thus a person can be converted when he is seventy or eighty years of age, although he was regenerated in infancy. This is impossible. It may very well be that a seed in nature can continue to live if it has no contact with the soil for many years. But it is inconceivable that a seed can be implanted in the soil and be under the influence of rain and sunshine without sprouting into life and bringing forth fruit. The same can be said of the seed of regeneration that is implanted in the heart and that comes under the influence of the preaching of the gospel. It will certainly reveal itself in faith and conversion without delay. The work of God is throughout characterized by perfect wisdom. It would be foolish to suppose that the seed of regeneration could lie dormant and inactive for many years without ever showing any signs of life. Although we distinguish logically between the seed of regeneration and its development into the new life, or between generation and birth of the new life, this distinction never means separation between regeneration and the word of God.

Preaching in the Sphere of the Covenant

That regeneration in the narrowest sense is immediate and is not effected by the preaching of the word but precedes it, I have abundantly proved to be the true presentation of this truth in the Bible.

The same truth is presupposed by the fact of the regeneration of small children and infants.

Those who insist that regeneration is always effected through the preaching of the word do not have an explanation of the salvation of young children.

According to some, infants are not regenerated, for regeneration presupposes conscious faith, which cannot be present in infants. They claim that children must be saved in some other way. Some suggest that after death they are no longer infants and are regenerated in glory. Others who hold that regeneration is mediate allow an exception for infants, who can be regenerated immediately. However, either this is true only with those infants who die in early infancy, or the seed of regeneration is implanted in all the children who are reborn in early childhood. It seems strange that God would make an exception for children who die in infancy. If God is able to regenerate some children, what possible reason could there be to wait in the case of others until they can understand the preaching of the word to implant in them the seed of regeneration? But if the seed of regeneration is implanted in all the children who are reborn in infancy, it can be regarded as an established rule that infants in the line of the covenant are regenerated before they are able to hear the preaching of the word. In that case there is very little room left for mediate regeneration.

This is our view. In the line of the covenant, in the church, the seed of regeneration is implanted in the hearts of the children of the covenant in infancy. There are exceptions. God is free to work his grace in the hearts of his people either in infancy or in later years, but as a rule their rebirth takes place in earliest childhood.

This view of immediate regeneration is not based on the presupposition that children are regenerated. On the contrary, the conception that regeneration is an immediate work of the Holy Spirit, independent of the preaching of the word, is founded directly on scripture. Because scripture teaches this truth and presents the rebirth of his people in the narrowest sense of the implanting of the seed of regeneration as an immediate work by the Holy Spirit, it is evident that also infants can receive the grace of regeneration. Because on the basis of scripture regeneration must be understood as an immediate work of the Spirit and for that reason the regeneration of infants is possible, it is a common rule in the line of the covenant that children are reborn from infancy.

Then we can understand the significance and operation of the preaching of the word in the sphere of the church and in the line of the covenant as a means of grace. Means require conscious reaction. They are elements God uses, and which we also use. God uses bread to nourish our bodies, and we eat it. Thus the Holy Spirit uses the preaching of the word to work faith and to strengthen it, and we also use it and are responsible for the use of the word of God. Only the living can use means. The dead cannot eat and drink. The spiritually dead react to the preaching of the word, but only to reject it. They never come to repentance and faith. To them it is a savor of death unto death. But just as the physically living

can use the means God provides for the sustenance of their earthly lives, so the spiritually living can use the means that the Holy Spirit provides for the working of faith and for its development and upbuilding.

Life is first. Regeneration precedes all other works of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the sinner. In regeneration the Holy Spirit implants the power, or the faculty, of faith so that potentially the regenerated is a believer before he comes to the conscious activity of faith. The common view of Reformed theologians is that the implanting of the faculty of faith is usually done in infancy in the line of the covenant.

Ursinus in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism answered an objection raised by those who opposed the truth of infant baptism.

> Faith is, indeed, necessary to the use of baptism with this distinction. Actual faith is required in adults, and an inclination to faith in infants. There are, therefore, four terms in this syllogism, or there is a fallacy in understanding that as spoken particularly, which must be understood generally. Those who do not believe, that is, who have no faith at all, neither by profession nor by inclination, are not to be baptized. But infants born of believing parents have faith as to inclination…
>
> We also deny the minor proposition; for infants do believe after their manner, or according to the condition of their age; they have an inclination to faith. Faith is in infants potentially and by inclination, although not actually as in adults. For, as infants born of ungodly parents who are without the church, have no actual wickedness, but only an inclination thereto, so those who are born of godly parents have no actual holiness, but only an inclination to it; not according to nature, but according to the grace of the covenant. And still further: infants have the Holy Ghost and are regenerated by him. John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb, and Jeremiah is said to have been sanctified before he came out of the womb (Luke 1:15; Jer. 1:5). If infants now have the Holy Ghost, he certainly works in them regeneration, good inclinations, new desires, and such other things as are necessary for their salvation, or he at least supplies them with every thing that is requisite for their baptism, according to the declaration of Peter, "Can any man forbid water to them who have received the Holy Ghost as well as we." It is for this reason that Christ enumerates little children amongst those that believe, saying, "Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me" (Matt. 18:6). In as much now as infants are fit subjects for baptism, they do not profane it as the Anabaptists wickedly affirm.[12]

In the sphere of the covenant, conscious faith and repentance are wrought gradually in little children through the influence of the preaching of the word.

The influence of preaching and its sphere are not limited to the official ministry in the church on Sunday and on the mission field, but include many different spheres of labor. There is the work of the theological school to train young men for the ministry of the word, teaching them to exegete Holy Writ and to understand the doctrine of the church, and to develop, to maintain, and to defend the truth against all errors. There is the labor of preserving and translating, as well as of interpreting the Bible, a labor that shows its fruit not only in many works on textual criticism, but also in hundreds of commentaries. There is the church's calling to establish and to formulate the truth of the word of God in her confessions, not only to defend it against opponents and gainsayers, but also to preserve it in generations. In all of these labors the church —the pillar and ground of the truth to which the word of God has been entrusted —is the subject. Of all these labors the preaching of the word as a means of grace is the heart.

God in his infinite wisdom and mercy causes the children of the covenant to be born in the sphere of the church and from infancy to be under the influence of the preaching of the word. This begins already in the administration of baptism, in which the church exercises the influence of the preaching of the word by exacting from the parents the promise to bring up their children in the doctrine of the church or help or cause them to be instructed therein to the utmost of their power. The parents are also asked to acknowledge that this doctrine is contained in the Old and New Testaments and in the articles of the Christian faith, is taught in this Christian church, and is the true and perfect doctrine of salvation.[13] In accordance with this pledge of the parents, the influence of the word of God is first exerted upon the child in the covenantal home. This influence is continued in Sunday school, through the ministry of the word in catechism, and in the congregation through the preaching. Further, the influence of the preaching of the word in the sphere of the church is felt in many other ways, as the reading of the Bible in the home, the conversation of the saints among one another, and the study of scripture in various societies organized within the church. At the heart of this sphere and influence is the preaching of the word as a means of grace, together with the administration of the sacraments.

Who can say at how early an age the Holy Spirit is able to quicken the seed of regeneration and to bring the faculty of faith to a more or less conscious activity?

Even worldly educators realize that from earliest infancy or from birth the outside world streams into and impresses the consciousness of the child. Modern educators stress the importance of surrounding the infant with objects, sounds,

shapes, colors, and smells to make the most favorable impressions upon the infant. Why cannot the Holy Spirit impress the little child with the influences of a covenantal home—the singing of psalms or hymns, the playing of sacred music, the simple prayer uttered by the parent at the cradle, the folding of the little hands of the infant in prayer at the table in a high chair, and many other influences of the Christian home—to bring the faculty of faith into conscious activity? Even though we know very little of an infant's life, it is certain that long before what is usually considered the age of discretion there can be a decided influence of the word of God on covenantal children.

Especially for this reason my conviction is that children of the covenant are regenerated from earliest infancy. Why should God according to the rule of the covenant bring little children under the influence of the preaching of the word from their earliest infancy if they are not regenerated? The dead cannot use means, and there is no proper reaction to the preaching of the word by the spiritually dead. Only the spiritually living can use the means the Holy Spirit provides for the working of faith and for its development and upbuilding. Therefore as a rule, barring exceptions, the children of the covenant who are elect are also regenerated from their earliest infancy.

Thus covenantal children gradually come to conscious faith, receive the promise, and assume their part of the covenant, which according to the baptism form consists of new obedience; to cleave to the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; to trust in him and to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and to forsake the world, crucify our old nature, and walk in a new and holy life.[14] When the child of the covenant reaches the age of discretion and has always walked in the way of the covenant, he is not and cannot be expected to be conscious of any sudden or remarkable change or conversion in his life.

The change called conversion must surely take place, as the Catechism teaches in answer 87. Those who continue in their wicked and ungrateful lives and are not converted to God cannot be saved. No unchaste person, idolater, adulterer, thief, covetous, drunkard, slanderer, robber, or any such like will inherit the kingdom of God. The covenant child therefore must be able to give account of himself and be conscious of true conversion, which consists of the mortification of the old man and the quickening of the new man. He must be conscious of a sincere sorrow of heart that he has provoked God by his sins. He must be conscious of a sincere joy of heart in God through Christ and of a sincere delight to live according to the will of God in all good works. In the covenant conversion is not sudden or marked but gradual. The question is not when and where the covenantal child was converted or how that change was effected in him, but whether he knows he is converted and reveals his conversion

by a walk in the way of continued conversion in the church and in the world. This entire change is wrought through the preaching of the word.

It stands to reason that the preaching of the word in the sphere of the covenant must be both distinctive and upbuilding.

The preaching cannot be based on the assumption that all the children of the covenant, those born in the sphere of and under the covenant, are elect and regenerated. The theory of presumptive regeneration, which presumes the regeneration of all the children born under the covenant, is unscriptural. All are not Israel who are of Israel, and not the children of the flesh but the children of the promise are counted for the seed (Rom. 9:6, 8).

Nor can it be said that the children under the covenant who are and remain carnal and never come to saving faith or true conversion belong to the exceptions. The history of the Old Testament church teaches the opposite. Always the carnal seed abounded in the covenant of the old dispensation, and the remnant according to the election of grace was saved. It appears no different when we look at the church of the new dispensation. If we consider baptized Christendom as the whole, it seems that those who have apostatized from the faith are far more numerous than the faithful believers. Always there is the carnal seed in the church.

The theory of presumptive regeneration is not only unscriptural, but also dangerous. It is not dangerous because, as the popular saying goes, it tends to let people go to hell with an imaginary heaven, for that is impossible, at least where the truth is preached. The danger is that because it presumes what is not true according to scripture, it leaves in the church carnally minded men who corrupt the church of Christ. Therefore the preaching must be directed to elect and reprobate, to the godly and the ungodly. It must be so distinctive that under its influence the reprobate and ungodly cannot remain, but will reveal themselves as haters of the truth of God and his Christ.

Besides, even the elect and regenerated are imperfect. Even regarding them there is much flesh in the church. Daily they have to strive with the desires and lusts of the flesh, and they must be admonished to walk steadfastly in the way of the covenant, to hate sin, to fight against it, and to flee from it.

Hence preaching in the sphere of the covenant must always be distinctive. This does not mean that it must divide the church into elect and reprobate, converted and unconverted, and address them separately. It means rather that the whole church, as it organically exists in the world, must be brought under the influence of the same preaching. The same word must be directed to all; all must be exhorted to be converted and to convert themselves, to repent in dust and ashes. All must be admonished continually to walk in sanctification and to live

antithetically, as of the party of the living God in the world, for “all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Such preaching will be a savor of life unto life for those whom God has chosen unto everlasting salvation and a savor of death unto death for the rest. Only under such preaching will the church be built up and will believers be edified.

The Idea of the Sacraments

The second means of grace are the sacraments.

Question and answer 66 give a general description or definition of the sacraments. Question and answer 67 describe the sacraments and the word of God as concentrating our attention centrally on the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ offered for us on the cross. Question and answer 68 mention the two sacraments, namely, holy baptism and the Lord’s supper.

The sacraments are “holy, visible signs and seals, appointed of God…more fully [to] declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel, namely, that he grants us freely the remission of sin and life eternal, for the sake of that one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross.”

Sacraments presuppose the presence of faith in those who use them. This is indicated in answer 65, which states that the Holy Ghost works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel and confirms it by the use of the sacraments. There is no positive effect unto salvation on the unbeliever of either baptism or the Lord’s supper.

The sacraments are visible signs of God’s invisible grace.

The sacraments are seals, or marks, of the authority of the God of our salvation.

The sacraments are appointed by God. There are many signs and many seals, but in order to be sacraments, signs and seals must be definitely and especially ordained and appointed by God.

The sacraments signify and seal the promise of the gospel that God freely grants to us the remission of sins and life eternal for the sake of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross.

Other definitions or descriptions of the sacraments are found in the other Reformed symbols.

> We believe that our gracious God, on account of our weakness and infirmities, hath ordained the sacraments for us, thereby to seal unto us his promises, and to be pledges of the good will and grace of God toward us, and also to nourish and strengthen our faith, which he hath joined to the Word of the gospel, the better to present to our senses both that which he signifies to us by his Word and that which he works inwardly in our hearts, thereby assuring and confirming in us the salvation which he imparts to us. For they are visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God worketh in us by the power of the Holy Ghost. Therefore the signs are not in vain or insignificant, so as to deceive us. For Jesus Christ is the true object presented by them, without whom they would be of no moment.
>
> Moreover, we are satisfied with the number of sacraments which Christ our Lord hath instituted, which are two only, namely, the sacrament of baptism and the holy supper of our Lord Jesus Christ.[15]

In the main this description of the sacraments agrees with the Heidelberg Catechism. First, the Belgic Confession teaches that the sacraments presuppose faith. God ordains them and gives them to us to nourish and strengthen our faith. Second, sacraments are visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, and God has joined them to the word of the gospel the better to present to our senses what he signifies by his word and what he works inwardly in our hearts, thereby assuring and confirming in us the salvation he imparts to us. Third, the sacraments are ordained and instituted by God. Fourth, the object of the sacraments is the promises of God. Sacraments are pledges of the good will and grace of God toward us. The new element expressed in this article in distinction from the Heidelberg Catechism is that the sacraments signify and seal not only the objective promises of God, but also an invisible thing, by means whereof God works in us by the power of the Holy Ghost. This refers to the grace of God wrought by the Holy Ghost in the hearts of the believers.

The First Helvetic Confession emphasizes that sacraments considered as a whole do not consist only in the signs and seals but include the things signified.

> The signs, which are called sacraments are two: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These sacraments are significant, holy signs of sublime, secret things. However, they are not mere, empty signs, but consist of the sign and the substance. For in baptism the water is the sign, but the substance and spiritual thing is rebirth and admission into the people of God. In the Lord’s Supper the bread and wine are the signs, but the spiritual substance is the

> communion of the body and blood of Christ, the salvation acquired on the Cross, and forgiveness of sins. As the signs are bodily received, so these substantial, invisible and spiritual things are received in faith. Moreover, the entire power, efficacy and fruit of the sacraments lies in these spiritual and substantial things.[16]

The Second Helvetic Confession has a long article on the sacraments. It is too long to quote in its entirety, so I will quote only some of its main parts.

> God even from the beginning added unto the preaching of the Word his sacraments, or sacramental signs, in his Church. And to this does the holy Scripture plainly testify. Sacraments are mystical symbols, or holy rites, or sacred actions, ordained by God himself, consisting of his Word, of outward signs, and of things signified: whereby he keeps in continual memory, and recalls to mind, in his Church, his great benefits bestowed upon man; and whereby he seals up his promises, and outwardly represents, and, as it were, offers unto our sight those things which inwardly he performs unto us, and therewithal strengthens and increases our faith through the working of God's Spirit in our hearts; lastly, whereby he does separate us from all other people and religions, and consecrates and binds us wholly unto himself, and gives us to understand what he requires of us.[17]

Essentially the same elements are in this article as are in the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession, except this article emphasizes that the things signified belong to the sacraments as a whole. It also says that the word of God belongs to the sacraments, and it is mentioned first.

The Second Helvetic Confession emphasizes that the sacraments are ordained by God only, as well as that they presuppose faith in those who use them.

> The author and institutor of all sacraments is not any man, but God alone: for man can by no means ordain sacraments, because they belong to the worship of God, and it is not for man to appoint and to prescribe a service of God, but to embrace and retain that which is taught unto him by the Lord. Besides, the sacramental signs have God's promises annexed to them, which necessarily require faith: now faith stays itself only upon the Word of God; and the Word of God is resembled into writings or letters, the sacraments to seals, which the Lord alone sets to his own letters. And as the Lord is the author of the sacraments, so he continually works in that Church where they are rightly used; so that the faithful, when they receive them

> from the ministers, do know that the Lord works in his own ordinance, and therefore they receive them as from the hand of God; and the ministers' faults (if there be any notorious in them) can not hurt them, seeing they do acknowledge the goodness of the sacraments to depend only upon the ordinance of the Lord. For which cause they put a difference, in the administration of the sacraments, between the Lord himself and his minister; confessing that the substance of the sacraments is given them by the Lord, and the outward signs by the ministers of the Lord.[18]

The following quotation is significant because the Confession emphasizes the word of God as an essential element in the sacraments.

> And as in the old Church the sacraments consisted of the word, the sign, and the thing signified, so even at this day they are composed, as it were, of the same parts. For the Word of God makes them sacraments, which before were none: for they are consecrated by the Word, and declared to be sanctified by him who first ordained them. To sanctify or consecrate a thing is to dedicate it unto God, and unto holy uses; that is, to take it from the common and ordinary use, and to appoint it to some holy use. For the signs in the sacraments are drawn from common use, things external and visible. As in Baptism, the outward sign is the element of water, and that visible washing which is done by the minister; but the thing signified is regeneration and the cleansing from sins. Likewise, in the Lord's Supper, the outward sign is bread and wine, taken from things commonly used for meat and drink; but the thing signified is the body of Christ which was given, and his blood which was shed for us, or the communion of the body and blood of the Lord. Wherefore, the water, bread, and wine, considered in their own nature, and out of the holy use and institution of the Lord, are only that which they are called, and which we find them to be. But let the Word of God be added to them, together with invocation upon his holy name, and the renewing of their first institution and sanctification, and then these signs are consecrated, and declared to be sanctified by Christ. For Christ's first institution and consecration of the sacraments stands yet in force in the Church of God, in such sort that they who celebrate the sacraments no otherwise than the Lord himself from the beginning has appointed, have still, even to this day, the use and benefit of that first and most excellent consecration. And for this cause, in the administration of the sacraments, the very words of Christ are repeated.[19]

The following paragraph is significant because it clearly shows that in a sacrament the thing signified belongs with the signs and seals.

> And as we learn out of the Word of God that these signs were appointed unto another end and use than the common one, therefore we teach that they now, and in this their holy use, do take upon them the names of things signified, and are not still called bare water, bread, or wine; but that the water is called "regeneration, and washing of the new birth" (Titus 3:5), and the bread and wine "the body of the Lord" (1 Cor. 10:16), or the pledges and sacraments of his body and blood. Not that the signs are turned into the things signified, or cease to be that which in their own nature they are (for then they could not be sacraments, which should consist only of the thing signified, and have no signs); but therefore do the signs bear the names of things, because they are mystical tokens of holy things, and because the signs and the things signified are sacramentally joined together; joined together, I say, or united by a mystical signification, and by the purpose and will of him who first instituted them. For the water, bread, and wine are not common, but holy signs. And he that instituted water in Baptism did not institute it with that mind and purpose that the faithful should only be dipped in the water of Baptism; and he which commanded the bread to be eaten and wine to be drunk in the Supper did not mean that the faithful should only receive bread and wine without any further mystery, as they eat bread at home in their houses: but that they should spiritually be partakers of the things signified, and by faith be truly purged from their sins, and be partakers of Christ also.[20]

The French Confession of Faith emphasizes that the word of God is always the main means of grace and that the sacraments are added to the word for more ample confirmation. Sacraments are pledges and seals of the grace of God. They are an aid and comfort to our faith, so that faith is presupposed. They are outward signs through which God operates by his Spirit. Of themselves, as mere signs, they are only smoke and shadow, and their substance and truth is in Jesus Christ.[21]

The French Confession affirms that through the Lord's supper the Holy Spirit feeds and strengthens us with the substance of the body and blood of Christ; this is done spiritually and can be apprehended only by faith.[22]

Article 37 of the French Confession emphasizes that in the sacraments the sign and the thing signified belong together. "We believe…that in the Lord's Supper, as well as in baptism, God gives us really and in fact that which he there

sets forth to us; and that consequently with these signs is given the true possession and enjoyment of that which they present to us." This is true only for the believer: "Thus all who bring a pure faith, like a vessel, to the sacred table of Christ, receive truly that of which it is a sign; for the body and blood of Jesus Christ give food and drink to the soul, no less than bread and wine nourish the body.[23]

The Scots Confession of Faith emphasizes that the sacraments are instituted by the Lord Jesus for the confirmation and strengthening of believers' faith to seal in their hearts the assurance of the promise of God and the most blessed communion of the elect with the head, Christ Jesus. The sacraments are not "naked and bare signs," but they are so efficacious that "by Baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of His righteousness, by which our sins are covered and remitted." Christ Jesus is so joined with us by the Lord's supper "that He becomes the very nourishment and food for our souls." All this is effected through the sacraments "by means of the Holy Ghost, who by true faith carries us above all things that are visible, carnal, and earthly, and makes us feed upon the body and blood of Christ Jesus, once broken and shed for us but now in heaven, and appearing for us in the presence of His Father." The sacraments are effectual not only at the moment they are administered or when the believers partake of them, but they also bring forth fruit afterward as a lively seed sown in good ground; "for the Holy Spirit, who can never be separated from the right institution of the Lord Jesus, will not deprive the faithful of the fruit of that mystical action." All this comes by "true faith that apprehends Christ Jesus, who alone makes the sacrament effective in us."[24]

The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England speak of the sacraments in general.

> Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God's good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him.[25]

Article 27 speaks of the sacrament of baptism as follows:

> Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the

> forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God.[26]

Concerning the Lord's supper the Thirty-nine Articles confess the following:

> The Supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another; but rather it is a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death: insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ.[27]

The Thirty-nine Articles also emphasize that faith is presupposed in the administration and the use of the sacraments and that without faith no one can really or essentially receive the sacraments properly.

> The Wicked, and such as be void of a lively faith, although they do carnally and visibly press with their teeth (as Saint Augustine saith) the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ; yet in no wise are they partakers of Christ: but rather, to their condemnation do eat and drink the sign or Sacrament of so great a thing."[28]

The Anglican Catechism is instructive in its emphasis that to the sacraments proper belong not only the outward and visible signs, but also the inward spiritual grace. In other words, without grace there is no sacrament.

> *How many Sacraments hath Christ ordained in his Church?*
> Two only, as generally necessary to salvation: that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord.
>
> *What meanest thou by this word* Sacrament*?*
> I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us, ordained by Christ himself as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof.
>
> *How many parts are there in a Sacrament?*
> Two: the outward visible sign, and the inward spiritual grace.
>
> *What is the outward visible sign or form in Baptism?*

Water; wherein the person is *baptized* IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY GHOST.

What is the inward and spiritual grace?

A death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness: for, being by nature born in sin, and the children of wrath, we are hereby made the children of grace.

What is required of persons to be baptized?

Repentance, whereby they forsake sin; and Faith, whereby they steadfastly believe the promises of God made to them in that Sacrament.

Why, then, are infants baptized, when by reason of their tender age they cannot perform them?

Because they promise them both by their Sureties; which promise, when they come to age, themselves are bound to perform.

Why was the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper ordained?

For the continual remembrance of the sacrifice of the death of Christ, and of the benefits which we receive thereby.

What is the outward part or sign in the Lord's Supper?

Bread and wine, which the Lord hath commanded to be received.

What is the inward part, or thing signified?

The body and blood of Christ, which are verily and indeed taken and received by the faithful in the Lord's Supper.

What are the benefits whereof we are partakers thereby?

The strengthening and refreshing of our souls by the body and blood of Christ, as our bodies are by the bread and wine.

What is required of them who come to the Lord's Supper?

To examine themselves, whether they repent them truly of their former sins, steadfastly purposing to lead a new life; have a lively faith in God's mercy through Christ, with a thankful remembrance of his death; and be in charity with all men.[29]

The Anglican Catechism emphasizes that in the administration and the use of the sacraments faith is required. In connection with the statement that the

sacrament consists both of the outward visible signs and of the inward spiritual grace, it is evident that there can be no true sacrament except for the believer. Like the preaching of the word, the sacraments are not a general offer of grace. Just as to those who do not have faith, the preaching of the word is always a savor of death unto death, so the sacraments are always unto the condemnation of those who partake of them without faith.

The Irish Articles of Religion teach regarding the sacraments as follows:

> The Sacraments ordained by Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather sure witnesses and effectual or powerful signs of grace and God's good will towards us, by which he doth work invisibly in us, and not only quickens, but also strengthens and confirms our faith in him.[30]

The Irish Articles also emphasize the truth that sacraments are not only unto salvation for the believer, but also unto judgment and condemnation for the unbeliever. They must not be carried about, but should be properly used, and "in such only as worthily receive the same, they have a wholesome effect and operation; but they that receive them unworthily, thereby draw judgment upon themselves."[31]

Baptism, according to the Irish Articles, is the "Sacrament of our admission into the Church, sealing unto us our new birth (and consequently our justification, adoption, and sanctification) by the communion which we have with Jesus Christ."[32]

"The Lord's Supper is not only a sign of the mutual love which Christians ought to bear one towards another, but much more a Sacrament of our preservation in the Church, sealing unto us our spiritual nourishment and continual growth in Christ.[33] The Articles describe the Lord's supper as follows:

> In the outward part of the holy Communion, the body and blood of Christ is in a most lively manner *represented*; being no otherwise present with the visible elements than things signified and sealed are present with the signs and seals—that is to say, symbolically and relatively. But in the inward and spiritual part the same body and blood is really and substantially *presented* unto all those who have grace to receive the Son of God, even to all those that believe in his name. And unto such as in this manner do worthily and with faith repair unto the Lord's table, the body and blood of Christ is not only signified and offered, but also truly exhibited and communicated.[34]

That faith is required and presupposed in the partaking of the Lord's supper is evident from the following: "The body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten in the Lord's Supper only after a heavenly and spiritual manner; and the mean whereby the body of Christ is thus received and eaten is Faith."[35]

Like the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, the Irish Articles emphasize that those who are wicked and do not have faith, although they carnally and visibly eat and drink the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, "in nowise are they made partakers of Christ; but rather to their condemnation do eat and drink the sign or Sacrament of so great a thing."[36]

The Westminster Confession of Faith describes the sacraments as

> holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him: as also to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.[37]

The Westminster Confession of Faith includes a sign and the thing signified in the sacrament: "There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation or a sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass that the names and the effects of the one are attributed to the other."[38]

But the whole of the sacrament is not effectual in itself, nor does its efficacy depend on the intention of him who administers the sacrament, but "upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with the precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers."[39]

The sacrament of baptism is "not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church, but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life."[40]

The confession of the Westminster concerning the sacrament of the Lord's supper is as follows:

> Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein he was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of his body and blood, called the Lord's Supper, to be observed in his Church, unto the end of the world; for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death, the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in him, their further

> engagement in, and to all duties which they owe unto him; and to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other, as members of his mystical body.[41]

Regarding the relation between the sign and the thing signified in the Lord's supper, the Confession states the following:

> The outward elements in this sacrament, duly set apart to the uses ordained by Christ, have such a relation to him crucified, as that truly, yet sacramentally only, they are sometimes called by the name of the things which they represent, to wit, the body and blood of Christ; albeit, in substance and nature, they still remain truly, and only, bread and wine, as they were before.[42]

The Westminster Confession also emphasizes that the sacraments are efficacious only to the believer and that the wicked can receive them only to their condemnation. In the sacrament of the Lord's supper faith receives and feeds upon Christ crucified and all the benefits of his death.

> Although ignorant and wicked men receive the outward elements in this sacrament, yet they receive not the thing signified thereby, but by their unworthy coming thereunto are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, to their own damnation. Wherefore all ignorant and ungodly persons, as they are unfit to enjoy communion with him, so are they unworthy of the Lord's table, and can not, without great sin against Christ, while they remain such, partake of these holy mysteries, or be admitted thereunto.[43]

These quotations from the Reformed symbols show what is the common conception of the Reformed churches regarding the sacraments of baptism and of the Lord's supper.

Sacraments are visible signs and seals instituted by God, administered by the church and received by believers and their seed, whereby he signifies visibly the invisible grace of his covenant and seals it unto the believers, and whereby he gives his church ensigns and banners of his covenant to distinguish her from the world.

Signs visibly represent invisible things. Numerous are such signs in the lives of men that express the spiritual and invisible by a visible and material token. A policeman wears a badge of his invisible authority and power. Members of secret societies and unions wear a button to denote their membership and their unity

with the fraternity to which they belong. A ship raises a flag as a sign of its nationality.

The same is true of signs in the word of God. The word itself is a sign, for language serves the purpose of expressing in visible and audible form what eye has not seen, what ear has never heard, and what has never been conceived in the heart of man. Also in creation there are many visible signs of the invisible and heavenly things. Generally all things are signs and symbols of heavenly things, for when the Creator called into existence the present world, he had respect to the world to come. Earthly things were not the ultimate realization of his eternal good pleasure. He has provided some better thing for his people, the glory of the heavenly kingdom. When he made earthly things, he had heavenly things in mind and made the earthly an image of the heavenly.

So all things are signs, and the things of the kingdom of God, according to the word of Christ, take place in parables. The sun and the moon and the stars, shining and sparkling in the firmament, the rainbow that spans the heavens, the beasts of the field and the flying birds, the cedars of Lebanon and the noble vine, as well as the thorn and the thistle, the lamb and the serpent, the mystery of numbers and the manifold beauty of colors, the earthly square and the heavenly cube and the eternal circle, the sparkling diamond and the softly shining pearl, the sand by the seashore, the restless ocean and the mighty mountains, the bare desert and the fertile field, the seed that falls in the earth and dies to live again, the fierce tempest and the gentle zephyr, the roaring thunder and the flashing lightning, the light of day and the darkness of the night—all things are signs, and they speak their own language, pointing upward and groaning in hope.

Besides, there are signs the Lord God separated out of creation and especially designated as signs to draw the attention of his people. The tree of life in the first paradise was more than a sign insofar as Adam through the means of that tree could receive the perpetuation of his earthly life. That tree was also a sign, as it stood in the first paradise as a token between God and Adam of the life of the friendship of God, an image of the eternal life in the new paradise that was to come. Also the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a sign to Adam and between God and Adam of the antithesis. It was a sign that in the way either of obedience or of disobedience Adam could attain to a certain knowledge of good and evil. In the way of obedience Adam would be established in the positive knowledge according to which he hated evil and loved good, but in the way of disobedience he would plunge himself into the darkness in which he hated good and loved evil.

After the deluge, God gave the sign of the rainbow to the people of his covenant. The rainbow was a visible creature of God, signifying the invisible

faithfulness and grace of God's eternal covenant as it encompasses the entire universe. Similar signs were given to Abraham in the stars of the firmament and in the sand by the seashore. In scripture the flood is called a sign of baptism, and so is the passage through the Red Sea, while the rock that followed the Israelites in the desert and the manna that rained from heaven pointed to Christ. All the miracles performed by the Savior during his earthly ministry—the healing of the sick, the restoration of sight to the blind and of hearing to the deaf, the strengthening of the lame and halt, the changing of water into wine, the cleansing of lepers, and the raising of the dead—were signs that manifested the power and authority of Christ to redeem and to renew all things in the eternal kingdom of heaven.

These signs are not sacraments, although some of them, especially the trees in paradise, have a certain sacramental value. These signs are distinguished from the sacraments in that they are not instituted in the church to be kept and administered by the church and to serve as distinguishing marks and banners for the church.

However, the sacraments are first signs. There are in the sacraments visible tokens: water, bread, and wine. These visible signs signify and represent the invisible grace of God's covenant: the blood of Christ, forgiveness of sins, justification, sanctification, the entrance into God's covenant, and the nourishing grace received out of Christ. They also serve as ensigns and banners, separating and distinguishing the people of God from the world and designating them as being of the party of the living God.

The sacraments are also seals, as we read in Romans 4:11: "He received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also." A seal is a sign of the authority of its author, in this case of God. It is a sign that cannot be violated or broken; it is a solemn pledge. It is the oath of God, which he will surely fulfill.

> 13. For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he sware by himself,
>
> 14. Saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee.
>
> 15. And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise.
>
> 16. For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife.

> 17. Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath:
>
> 18. That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us. (Heb. 6:13–18)

What exactly is sealed by the sacraments? Is everyone who receives the sacraments by that seal of God assured of his salvation? Are the sacraments seals on the persons who receive the sacraments? This is impossible, for then the sacrament would lie at least as often as it speaks the truth, because there are many who partake of sacraments or receive them without believing. Not all who receive sacraments are saved.

Some distinguish between the objective bequest of salvation and the subjective reception or acceptance of it. In that case God through the seal and the sign of the sacrament would assure everyone who receives the sacrament that he will grant salvation out of free grace. This means about the same thing as the well-meant offer of salvation to all who hear the gospel. Just as the promise of salvation in the well-meant offer of the gospel is for all who hear it, so God objectively promises grace, righteousness, salvation, and eternal life to all who outwardly receive the sacrament. Whether or not the sacrament will be applicable to and valid for the one who receives it depend on his or her acceptance of God's gracious bequest.

This is the view of the sacrament that William Heyns taught for many years and that many in the Christian Reformed Church imbibed. For him the essence of the covenant is the promise of God, which amounts to a well-meant offer of salvation to every person who receives the sacrament. He distinguished between the objective bequest of salvation on the part of God and the subjective application or acceptance of that bequest on the part of the one being baptized. He distinguished in the baptism form between the work of the Father and the Son on the one hand and the work of the Holy Spirit on the other. In the sacrament God the Father witnesses and seals that he makes an eternal covenant of grace with us and adopts us for his children and heirs and therefore will provide us with every good thing and avert all evil or turn it to our profit. The Son seals that he washes us in his blood from all our sins and incorporates us into the fellowship of his death and resurrection, so that we are freed from all our sins and accounted righteous before God.[44] All this belongs to God's objective bequest of grace and salvation, to the promise of God that is applicable to everyone who receives the sacrament. But whether those who partake of the sacrament will actually receive salvation depends upon their subjective state and

faith.

Heyns interpreted the part of the baptism form that speaks of the Holy Spirit's application of salvation and of all the blessings of salvation in Christ to mean that salvation and the blessings of salvation are contingent upon the choice and the will of man. God the Father and God the Son objectively grant and bequeath all that is included in the promise of salvation to everyone who receives the sacrament. The Holy Spirit will dwell in us and sanctify us to be members of Christ, applying unto us that which we have in Christ; but whether he will actually apply this salvation to us depends upon our acceptance of God's objective bequest. It goes without saying that this is Arminian and Pelagian error.

We must view the matter differently. Sacraments do not seal the persons who receive the sacraments or an objective bequest or offer of salvation to everyone who receives the sign of the sacrament. They do seal the righteousness that is out of faith. That is why the Reformed symbols emphasize the element of faith. God seals and assures with an oath that he reckons faith unto righteousness. Through the sacraments he assures believers in Jesus Christ that he will surely grant to them all the grace of his covenant and the salvation he promised them. The sacraments are particular, not general. Just as the promises of the gospel are particular and are only for believers, the elect, so also the seals of the sacraments are particular: the sacraments set the inviolable seals of God on the unbreakable connection between faith and righteousness without the works of the law.

This is the meaning of Romans 4:11: "He received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised." This is also the meaning of question and answer 67 of the Heidelberg Catechism: "Are both Word and sacraments, then, ordained and appointed for this end, that they may direct our faith to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation? Yes, indeed; for the Holy Ghost teaches us in the gospel, and assures us by the sacraments, that the whole of our salvation depends upon the one sacrifice of Christ which he offered for us on the cross."

Sacraments direct our *faith* to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Faith is presupposed and is an indispensable requisite for receiving the sacraments. The unbeliever has absolutely nothing in the sacraments. The sacraments do not lie, for they seal the righteousness that is of faith. No more than the promise of the gospel lies when it declares that all those who believe in Jesus Christ will have eternal life, do the sacraments lie when they signify and seal the very same promise of the gospel. Exactly because faith is required in the true participation of the sacraments, and faith is not of man but is the work of God through the Holy Spirit, the author of faith, the sacraments as well as the gospel are

ultimately only for the elect. And just as for the unbelieving reprobate the gospel is a savor of death unto death, so are the sacraments a savor of death unto death for those who do not have faith. Therefore, in the sacraments God seals his salvation only to believers.

Sacraments are signs and seals instituted by God. This implies that God ordained them and separated them unto the purpose of sacraments. Bread, water, and wine are adapted in creation to be signs of the grace of Christ, but without anything else they are not sacramental signs. This they become through God's separating and ordaining them specifically to be signs of his salvation. This also implies that the church received the sacraments to observe, administer, and celebrate. This was true of circumcision and the passover in the old dispensation, and this is equally true of baptism and holy communion in the new dispensation. "God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; every man child among you shall be circumcised…and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you" (Gen. 17:9–11). "This day [passover] shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever" (Ex. 12:14). In Matthew 28:19 we read: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." In 1 Corinthians 11:23–27 the apostle Paul spoke of his receiving the ordinance of the Lord's supper as a special revelation.

> 23. I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread:
>
> 24. And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.
>
> 25. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.
>
> 26. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.
>
> 27. Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

LORD'S DAY 26

Q. 69. How art thou admonished and assured by holy baptism that the one sacrifice of Christ upon the cross is of real advantage to thee?

A. Thus: That Christ appointed this external washing with water, adding thereto this promise, that I am as certainly washed by his blood and Spirit from all the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sins, as I am washed externally with water, by which the filthiness of the body is commonly washed away.

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

A. It is to receive of God the remission of sins freely, for the sake of Christ's blood, which He shed for us by his sacrifice upon the cross; and also to be renewed by the Holy Ghost, and sanctified to be members of Christ, that so we may more and more die unto sin and lead holy and unblamable lives.

Q. 71. Where has Christ promised us that he will as certainly wash us by his blood and Spirit as we are washed with the water of baptism?

A. In the institution of baptism, which is thus expressed: *Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. He that believeth, and is baptized, shall be saved; but he that believeth not, shall be damned.* This promise is also repeated where the scripture calls baptism the washing of regeneration and the washing away of sins.

Chapter Two



LORD'S DAY 26

The Sacrament of Baptism in the Reformed Confessions

The text of the English translation quoted on the previous page is faithful to the original, except that in question 70 "freely" should be "through grace."

Because of the importance of the subject of holy baptism, it is of interest to consult the Reformed confessions.

The First Helvetic Confession teaches that baptism is the washing of regeneration, a visible sign administered through the ministry of the church, a sign only for the elect, and that children are baptized because they belong to the communion of the people of God and are presumed to be regenerated.[1]

According to the Second Helvetic Confession baptism is a sign and seal of our being enrolled and received into the covenant and family and the inheritance of the sons of God, of our being purged from all our sins by the blood of God's son, of our being adopted as children of God, and of our being inwardly regenerated and renewed through the Holy Spirit.

> There is but one baptism in the Church of God; for it is sufficient to be once baptized or consecrated unto God. For baptism once received does continue all a man's life, and is a perpetual sealing of our adoption unto us. For to be baptized in that name of Christ is to be enrolled, entered, and received into the covenant and family, and so into the inheritance, of the sons of God; yea, and in this life to be called after the name of God; that is to say, to be called a son of God; to be purged also from the filthiness of sins, and to be endued with the manifold grace of God, in order to lead a new and innocent life. Baptism, therefore, does call to mind and keep in remembrance the great benefit of God performed to mankind. For we are all born in the

> pollution of sin and are the children of wrath. But God, who is rich in mercy, does freely purge us from our sins by the blood of his Son, and in him does adopt us to be his sons, and by a holy covenant does join us to himself, and does enrich us with divers gifts, that we might live a new life. All these things are sealed up unto us in baptism. For inwardly we are regenerated, purified, and renewed of God through the Holy Spirit; and outwardly we receive the sealing of most notable gifts by the water, by which also those great benefits are represented, and, as it were, set before our eyes to be looked upon. And therefore are we baptized, that is, washed or sprinkled with visible water. For the water makes clean that which is filthy, and refreshes and cools the bodies that fail and faint. And the grace of God deals in like manner with the soul; and that invisibly and spiritually. [2]

The Belgic Confession has a long article on holy baptism, from which we quote the following:

> We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law, hath made and end, by the shedding of his blood, of all other sheddings of blood which men could or would make as a propitiation or satisfaction for sin; and that he, having abolished circumcision, which was done with blood, hath instituted the sacrament of baptism instead thereof, by which we are received into the church of God and separated from all other people and strange religions, that we may wholly belong to him whose ensign and banner we bear, and which serves as a testimony to us that he will forever be our gracious God and father.
>
> Therefore he has commanded all those who are his to be baptized with pure water, *in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*, thereby signifying to us that, as water washeth away the filth of the body when poured upon it, and is seen on the body of the baptized when sprinkled upon him, so doth the blood of Christ, by the power of the Holy Ghost, internally sprinkle the soul, cleanse it from its sins and regenerate us from children of wrath unto children of God. Not that this is effected by the external water, but by the sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God, who is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, that is, the devil, and to enter into the spiritual land of Canaan.
>
> Therefore the ministers, on their part, administer the sacrament, and that which is visible, but our Lord giveth that which is signified by the

> sacrament, namely, the gifts and invisible grace; washing, cleansing, and purging our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving unto us a true assurance of his fatherly goodness; putting on us the new man, and putting off the old man with all his deeds.[3]

The Belgic Confession says that baptism was instituted instead of circumcision. By baptism we are received into the church of God and separated from the whole world that we may wholly belong to God. By baptism God testifies that he will forever be our gracious God and Father. Baptism is a sign of the washing away of the filth of our souls and of regeneration from children of wrath unto children of God. This is not effected by the external water but by the grace of God that washes, cleanses, and purges our souls of all filth and unrighteousness and renews our hearts and fills them with all comfort and gives unto us a true assurance of his fatherly goodness, and puts on us the new man and puts off the old man with all his deeds.

Two elements in the French Confession of Faith draw our attention. Baptism is a sign and seal of our incorporation into the body of Christ and therefore of its resulting benefits, the washing away of our sins and the renewal by the Holy Spirit. And the grace of baptism is not limited to the moment of baptism but lasts a lifetime.[4]

The Scots Confession of Faith also presents baptism as a sign and seal of our incorporation into the body of Christ and of the washing away of our sins. It confesses that by baptism we assuredly believe that we are engrafted into Christ Jesus to be made partakers of his justice, by which our sins are covered and remitted.[5]

The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England present baptism as a sign whereby the people of God are distinguished from the world, a sign of regeneration or of the new birth, an instrument whereby they who rightly receive the sacrament are engrafted into the church of Christ, as a visible sign and seal of the promise of the forgiveness of sins and the adoption unto sons of God by the Holy Ghost, and as means for the confirmation and strengthening of faith.[6]

The Anglican Catechism is interesting because it subjectively presents the truth concerning the sacrament of baptism, that is, from the viewpoint of the believing child. This is also true of the Heidelberg Catechism in question 69: “How art thou admonished and assured by holy baptism that the one sacrifice of Christ upon the cross is of real advantage to thee?” In the Anglican Catechism the child answers by faith that in baptism he was made a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven. He is also presented as

accepting his part of the covenant of God when he promises that he will renounce the devil and all his works, the pomp and vanity of the wicked world and all the sinful lusts of the flesh, that he will believe all the articles of the Christian faith, and that he will keep the holy will of God and his commandments and walk in them all the days of his life. This is repeated in the question and answer concerning the inward and spiritual grace signified in baptism, when the child answers that baptism signifies death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness and that "being by nature born in sin, and the children of wrath, we are hereby made the children of grace."[7]

The Irish Articles of Religion teach that

> baptism is not only an outward sign of our profession, and a note of difference, whereby Christians are discerned from such as are no Christians: but much more a Sacrament of our admission into the Church, sealing unto us our new birth (and consequently our justification, adoption, and sanctification) by the communion which we have with Jesus Christ.[8]

The Westminster Confession of Faith contains the following paragraphs on holy baptism:

> Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church, but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life: which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his Church until the end of the world.
>
> The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the gospel lawfully called thereunto.
>
> Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.
>
> Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.
>
> Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it, or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.

> The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.
>
> The sacrament of baptism is but once to be administered to any person. [9]

There is no new element in the Westminster Confession, but by implication it repudiates the theory that baptism is based on presumptive regeneration and emphasizes the truth that the efficacy of baptism is experienced only by the elect.

The Institution of Baptism

The exposition of the idea of the sacraments emphasized that a rite or ceremony must be divinely instituted to partake of the character of a sacrament. Bread, wine, and water are in their nature symbols of nourishment and of purification, but this does not constitute them as sacraments. Sacraments must be divinely appointed, or ordained, and instituted in the church. That they are instituted in the church and must be observed by the church are essential elements in the sacraments.

The washings and purifications among Israel were instituted by divine law, and thus ordained they foreshadowed the sacrament of baptism. When the sacrament of baptism was instituted, the idea that washing with water symbolized a spiritual purification was not strange to Israel. But all these purifications and washings had no sacramental value because they were not instituted to be observed by the whole church, but regulated only special cases, such as a woman after childbirth, contact with a corpse or carcass, or eating what died of itself. The same is true of the baptism of proselytes. They were baptized as a sign, together with circumcision, of their incorporation into the Jewish nation. This also indicates that baptism was not an unknown rite.

The Heidelberg Catechism recognizes the importance of Christ's institution of the sacrament of baptism and its observance by the whole church. The entire question and answer 71 is devoted to the institution of baptism.

Many in our day attach no significance to baptism as a sacrament. To them it is a mere formality: the baby must be christened. At best it means that the child is marked as a member of some church and is not a heathen. Others reject

baptism altogether and speak contemptuously of water baptism, which to them has no significance whatsoever, because one must be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Therefore it is important to emphasize that baptism is an institution of God by divine appointment and by Christ's ordination.

Let us look at the baptism of John, which was also divinely instituted.

By decree of the Council of Trent, the Romans Catholic Church rejects John's baptism as being essentially the same as Christian baptism: "If anyone saith, that the baptism of John had the same force as the baptism of Christ: let him be anathema."[10]

Others, even among Reformed theologians, deny the identity of the two baptisms. They point out that Acts 19:1–6 clearly speaks of a case of some who were baptized by John and were baptized again by Paul. To say the least, it is questionable whether this view does not rest on a mistaken interpretation of the passage, which reads as follows:

1. It came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus; and finding certain disciples,
2. He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.
3. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism.
4. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.
5. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.
6. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied.

Where in this passage is the end of Paul's address to these men? If the end is in verse 4, then the twelve men addressed were indeed rebaptized by Paul. But if verse 5 is included in Paul's address, he simply taught that the baptism of John was identical with the baptism of Jesus. The latter interpretation seems to be more probable. The clause in verse 5, "when they heard this," may (although not necessarily) leave the impression that when these men heard the words of Paul, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. In the original there is only the simple participle (*akousantes*), so we have the right to translate as "and hearing"

or “having heard him” instead of “when they heard this.” In that case Paul’s address continued to the end of verse 5, so that we may translate: “Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. Those who heard John were indeed baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” In that case the text does not refer to any rebaptism by Paul, but tells us that Paul instructed those twelve men that the baptism of John had the same significance as the baptism of Jesus; therefore, when they were baptized by John they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. In favor of this interpretation is also that Paul took no action until the sixth verse, which informs us that when Paul laid hands upon the men the Holy Ghost came upon them and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. If the text had meant to teach that Paul rebaptized those men, it would undoubtedly have read, “And when Paul had thus spoken to them, he baptized them in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when he laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came upon them, and they spake with tongues and prophesied.”

Regarding the identity of the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus, it must be admitted that baptism was not formally instituted until the glorification of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Only then were the disciples commanded, “Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt. 28:19). Besides, when John was baptized circumcision was still the sign and seal of righteousness by faith. John, as the greatest of all the prophets, stood on the threshold of the kingdom of heaven, but he belonged still to the old dispensation. For that same reason John baptized only Israelites and only adult Jews. Children were not baptized by John.

Yet the baptism of John had essentially the same significance as the baptism of Jesus. It was the baptism of the remission of sins, as we read in Matthew 3:5–6: “Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.” “John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Mark 1:4). Besides, the baptism of John was divinely ordained: “I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost” (John 1:33). That John was ordained is implied in Jesus’ question to the chief priests and elders of the people who questioned his authority, especially in cleansing the temple.

23. And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and elders of

> the people came unto him as he was teaching and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?
>
> 24. And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things.
>
> 25. The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him?
>
> 26. But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet.
>
> 27. And they answered Jesus and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things. (Matt. 21:23–27)

Besides, Jesus and John baptized simultaneously for a time: “After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized. And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized” (John 3:22–23). Also this shows clearly that the baptism of John was the same as the baptism of Jesus.

It is important too that a word be said about John’s baptizing Jesus, of which we read in Matthew 3:13–17:

> 13. Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him.
>
> 14. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?
>
> 15. And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him.
>
> 16. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him:
>
> 17. And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

On the face of it there is a paradox in this baptism of Jesus. The baptism of John was the baptism of repentance and of the remission of sins. This presupposed sin on the part of the one who was baptized. This also presupposed

consciousness of sin on the part of him who sought to be baptized and the earnest desire for forgiveness, sanctification, and righteousness. All this was not applicable to Jesus Christ. He knew no sin; he was the person of the Son of God in human nature. He was holy and undefiled, separate from sinners. He had therefore no consciousness of sin. How then could he, who had no need of forgiveness and no consciousness of repentance, properly receive the sign of forgiveness?

We are not surprised that at first John refused to baptize Jesus. He could not understand how it was possible that he was called to baptize his Lord. The word used in the original indicates that John was not easily persuaded to baptize Jesus. In the text we probably have only the gist and the essence of their conversation. John seemed to have a valid reason to refuse. In the presence of Jesus, John apparently felt that he was a sinner and that a sinful man certainly could not baptize his sinless Lord.

Yet the paradox was only apparent. In reality it was proper and necessary that Jesus should be baptized. True, considered as an individual he was not a subject for baptism, for he was without sin; he was holy and undefiled and had no need of repentance and forgiveness. But it is different when we understand that he is the head of his church. With that church he is legally one. He represented them before the face of God. The sins of all his people were upon him. Being under the law he was circumcised, and being the end of the law it was necessary for him to be baptized.

His baptism was unique because it was a sign of baptism in his own blood. This was his real baptism, of which the baptism of John was a sign. As he said later to the sons of Zebedee when they approached him with the request that he would grant one of them to sit on his right hand and the other on his left in his glory, “Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38). Baptism is a sign of submerging into death and bearing the punishment of sin fully to satisfy the justice of God. Baptism is also a sign of rising again to a new life. With this meaning Jesus was baptized. He descended into the depths of God’s wrath, into the deepest darkness of death, and tasted death for all his people. Justified by the sentence of God upon him, Christ arose in glorious resurrection. Of this baptism into his own blood he received the sign when John baptized him.

He was about to enter his public ministry, in which he was to announce the kingdom of heaven. Like John, he was to preach that the kingdom of heaven was nigh, but unlike John, Jesus was to preach in word and work that he would bring the kingdom of heaven. He is the good shepherd, the king, the anointed of God, the life, the bread of life, the water of life, the door, and the way into the

everlasting tabernacle of God. He was to enter into the sheepfold and lead out his sheep. All this was concentrated around his death. If he would not die, he would be none of this. His death was the essential element of his whole ministry, and therefore it was proper that he was baptized by John as a sign of his ultimate baptism into death.

This is clear from Jesus' answer to John, "Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). The righteousness of God with relation to the sin of his people must be fulfilled. His people must have forgiveness. If sin is to be forgiven, it must be blotted out, and in order to blot out sin, there must be an act of perfect satisfaction, the willing bearing of the wrath of God and of the punishment of sin. That is the fulfillment of all righteousness to which Jesus referred in his answer to John. By "thus" Jesus meant that by his being baptized of John and in the way of everything that baptism signifies, they must fulfill all righteousness.

Notice that the Lord did not say, "It becometh me," but he said, "It becometh us." In order for John to fulfill the righteousness of God it was necessary that Jesus be baptized. The reason for this is that John preached the forgiveness of sins and baptized with the baptism of repentance, but that baptism would be a lie if John would not function as the porter who opened the door of the sheepfold for Jesus. A door other than the death of Jesus there was not. Therefore John must fulfill all righteousness by being the porter who opened the door and by confessing that his baptism was significant only because of the baptism of the Lamb of God.

Thus we can understand the baptism of Jesus by John. Jesus descended into the Jordan as a pledge that as the obedient servant he would fulfill all righteousness and presently descend into the Jordan of his own death. Small wonder then that in the account of this baptism by Luke we read that as Jesus descended into the Jordan he was praying for the Spirit of God without measure and consecrating himself as the servant of the Lord. And no wonder that at the occasion of this baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ a voice sounded from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Thus the sacrament of baptism began to be instituted by John the Baptist. For God sent John to baptize and to be baptized by John had essentially the same meaning as to be baptized into Jesus Christ. The baptism of John was sealed by Christ when he came to John to be baptized. Finally, this institution of baptism was sealed for the whole church of the new dispensation by the specific command of Christ: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28:19). Or Mark 16:15–16: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every

creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."

The baptism formula used in the church is based on Matthew 28:19. The Greek translated as "in the name" is literally "into the name." This does not mean on the authority of the name of the triune God, but into the fellowship of God as he has revealed himself in the name of Jesus Christ.

The name of the Lord in scripture denotes God or Jehovah as he reveals himself to us, is known to us, and is near us. God is the infinite and eternal one, who is invisible, but he made himself a name and revealed himself. By this name he comes down to us, is known to us, is near us, and surrounds us on all sides.

This name of the Lord is in all the works of his hands, as the psalmist sings in Psalm 8:1, 9: "O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!" All creation is his handiwork. Brute creation, sun and moon and stars, mountains and valleys, oceans and seas, streams and lakes, forests and fields, as well as the living creatures, man and beast, were called forth by his word. They are, as it were, so many letters spelling the name of the Most High. Not only did he call them into being, but he is also in them and upholds them by his almighty and omnipresent power. He sustains and governs them in all their existences and operations. He causes the sun to rise every morning and to set every evening, and he causes the clouds to gather and the rain to fall on the thirsty land. He makes the seed to sprout in the earth and prepares food for man and beast. He governs the life of man and beast, of individuals and nations, and he directs the whole creation to the end that he determined from before the foundation of the world, the glory of his everlasting kingdom. All that occurs in creation and in the history of the world declares the name of the Lord, the revelation of the living God, who is always near, so that the psalmist can sing, "Unto thee, O God, do we give thanks, unto thee do we give thanks: for that thy name is near thy wondrous works declare" (Ps. 75:1).

Yet the works of God in creation and providence, in the things that are seen, do not reveal the name of the Lord in all its glory and beauty. We cannot know the Lord's name from the works of his hands in this world unless we behold them in the light of another name by which the Lord has made himself known to us. That name is Jesus. Apart from that one name the revelation of God in the things that are seen brings the name of God as a name of power and might, as a glorious name that must be glorified and feared. The revelation of God in the creation, apart from the name Jesus, also reveals the wrath of God and loudly proclaims that God is angry with the wicked every day and that he will visit the workers of iniquity with his just punishment in time and eternity. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of

men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18). Such is the revelation of the name of God through the things that are seen in this world of sin and death.

There is a new and wonderful revelation of the name of Jehovah—the name Jesus, the God of our salvation. Only when we behold the glorious name of the Lord from the viewpoint of the name Jesus does it become the name of the God of salvation. From the viewpoint of that name Jesus we behold the entire name of the triune God as a name of salvation, of unfathomable wisdom and boundless grace, of eternal loving-kindness and abundant mercy, as a name that causes all things to work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28).

This then is the name of Jehovah, of the triune God as the God of our salvation, into which we are baptized. It is the name of Jehovah that was revealed in the fullness of time when God sent his only begotten Son into the world, made of a woman and under the law (Gal. 4:4). The name Jehovah was revealed in the entire ministry of Jesus Christ, for by his word and work God spoke to us as the God of our salvation. It was revealed as the name of reconciliation in the accursed tree and the death of the Son of God, for "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them" (2 Cor. 5:19). The name of Jehovah was revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead as a name of everlasting righteousness, for he was delivered for our offenses and raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25). It was revealed as a name of glorification in the ascension of the Lord Christ and his exaltation at the right hand of God. It will be revealed in all the fullness of its saving power in the day of Christ when he will make all things new, and the tabernacle of God will be with men forever. It is the name of God that was declared to us by the Spirit and through faithful witnesses, that is preserved for us in the holy scriptures, and that is still proclaimed by the church.

Into the fellowship of that name, into the covenantal fellowship of the triune God in Jesus Christ our Lord, we are baptized.

From all this it is evident that baptism is a sacrament and institution of God through Christ to be observed by the whole church of the new dispensation.

The Meaning of Baptism

The Reformed confessions attribute a rich significance to the sacrament of baptism. They all confess with answer 69 of the Heidelberg Catechism that baptism signifies the washing away of sins through the blood of Christ: "Christ

appointed this external washing with water, adding thereto this promise, that I am as certainly washed by his blood and Spirit from all the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sins, as I am washed externally with water." Answer 70 explains what it means to be washed with the blood and spirit of Christ: "It is to receive of God the remission of sins freely, for the sake of Christ's blood, which he shed for us by his sacrifice upon the cross."

However, the Reformed confessions attribute a much richer significance to the sacrament of baptism, for it includes reception into the covenant and family and into the inheritance of the sons of God. It signifies not only to be purged from the filthiness of sin, but also to be endued with the manifold grace of God. It means that we are adopted as children of God and enriched with various gifts unto a new life. It signifies not only the remission of sins, but also regeneration, purification, and renewal. Thus the Catechism teaches in answer 70. After it says that baptism signifies the remission of sins, it adds that baptism also means "to be renewed by the Holy Ghost, and sanctified to be members of Christ, that so we may more and more die unto sin and lead holy and unblamable lives."

Some theologians emphasize that baptism signifies exclusively the washing away of sins. According to them, being buried with Christ into his death and being raised to a new life have nothing to do with the essential meaning of baptism. Their purpose is to defend sprinkling as a mode of baptism against those who insist that immersion is essential and necessary for baptism.

Sprinkling as a proper mode of baptism is sufficient and is sustained by holy scripture. Although the original word for baptism signifies "to dip" or "to immerse," sprinkling is sufficient because it belongs to the sign and not to the essence of baptism. We have nothing against immersion. We even admit that the complete sign of baptism is represented by immersion. But the mode of baptism, whether by sprinkling or pouring or immersion, is not essential but belongs to the outward form and symbol. As the common cup in distinction from the individual cup at the Lord's supper (granted that it was used in the original institution of that sacrament) is not essential to the significance of communion, but belongs only to the mode of celebrating the sacrament, so immersion, in distinction from sprinkling or pouring, is not essential to the meaning of the sacrament of baptism.

There are many indications in the Bible that a mode of baptism other than that of immersion was used. Even if we grant the possibility that John the Baptist at the river Jordan baptized the multitudes that came to him by means of immersion into the river, it seems inconceivable that the three thousand who were baptized on Pentecost were also immersed. The baptism of Cornelius and his household does not leave the impression that sufficient water was brought into the house for

all to be immersed. Besides, baptism by sprinkling is at least suggested in Ezekiel 36:25: “Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you.” The same is true of Hebrews 10:22: “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.” That immersion as a sign of baptism is not necessary to express the essential idea of the sacrament can also be gathered from John 13:4–10:

> 4. He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself.
>
> 5. After that he poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded.
>
> 6. Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet?
>
> 7. Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.
>
> 8. Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.
>
> 9. Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.
>
> 10. Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all.

If the Baptists, with their insistence on the necessity of immersion are right, then Peter, with his insistence on having not only his feet but also his hands and his head washed, was also right, and the Lord was in error. In the bodily sense one is not entirely clean by having his feet washed, but if bodily washing is a symbol and sign of a spiritual reality, foot-washing is entirely sufficient, according to the words of the Lord, “He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit.”

Although the sacrament of baptism centrally signifies the washing away of our sins through the blood of Christ, it implies so much more. This is evident from Romans 6:3–6:

> 3. Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?

> 4. Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.
>
> 5. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection:
>
> 6. Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.

This passage teaches that baptism signifies our incorporation into Jesus Christ, so that we are planted with him in the likeness of his death and resurrection, baptized into his death, buried with him into his death, and raised with him into newness of life.

The same truth is taught in Colossians 2:11–12, which also teaches that baptism is come in the place of circumcision: “In whom [Christ] also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.” This passage emphasizes that baptism signifies our incorporation into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That baptism signifies more than the forgiveness of sins can also be gathered from Titus 3:5: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.” The Catechism refers to this passage in answer 71: “This promise is also repeated where the scripture calls baptism the washing of regeneration.” It is uncertain whether “washing” refers directly to baptism or to regeneration, but there can be no doubt that the text at least refers to baptism. This verse is plain proof that baptism signifies not only the remission of sins, but also regeneration and renewal by the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

This truth is also taught in scripture by the great types of baptism: the flood and the passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea. Of the flood we read in 1 Peter 3:21: “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” In the preceding verse we read that in the ark “few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.” Baptism is typified by the water of the flood. Note that it was not by the ark, but by the water of the flood that the eight souls were saved. They were saved *in* the ark not *by* the ark. The meaning is that the flood separated the church in the ark from the wicked world and from total destruction. This is effected in reality by the death and

resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. Regarding the second type, the passage of Israel through the Red Sea, we read in 1 Corinthians 10:1–2, "Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea." Egypt was a type of the bondage of sin and of fellowship with the world, and Moses, the mediator of the old covenant, was a type of Christ. The passage through the Red Sea was a type of the separation of the church from the wicked world, of her deliverance from the bondage of sin, and of our baptism into Christ as the mediator of the new covenant.

As a sacrament baptism declares more fully and seals the promise of the gospel. It declares the promise of the gospel to us more fully. Not more fully *than* the word, but more fully *with* the word. The word is always the chief means of grace, and without the word the sacraments mean nothing. The sacraments supplement the word by signifying what the word declares, and in that sense the sacrament of baptism declares more fully unto us the promise of the gospel.

The promise of the gospel is the same as the gospel of the promise: the gospel is essentially the promise.

The promise of the gospel is *one* and is centrally always the promise of Christ, although according to scripture it is distinguished into many individual promises. It is the promise of the Holy Ghost (Acts 2:33); the promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come (1 Tim. 4:8); the promise of eternal life (1 John 2:25); the promise of Christ's coming (2 Pet. 3:4); the promise to enter into his rest (Heb. 4:1); and the promise to be heirs of the world (Rom. 4:13). The Bible speaks of the Holy Spirit of promise (Eph. 1:13); of the children of the promise, (Rom. 9:8); and of the heirs of the promise (Heb. 6:17; 11:9). The one promise of God in Christ is individualized into many distinct promises. Yet the promise is always essentially one and the same.

This promise of God is absolutely unconditional and can never fail to be realized. It is not to be confused with a well-meant offer of grace and salvation to all that is contingent on the will of man for its realization. The promise rests in God alone, in the truth and faithfulness of the eternal and unchangeable Jehovah. God alone realizes his promise both objectively and subjectively. Objectively he realizes it through Jesus Christ, his cross, resurrection, and exaltation at the right hand of God. Subjectively he fulfills his promise in the hearts of all the elect by the Spirit of grace. Powerfully and efficaciously he realizes his promise within us. He raises us from death and regenerates us, calls us with an almighty calling from darkness into light, strikes us down in true repentance and makes us cry out for him, implants into our hearts saving faith and makes us one with Christ, justifies us and gives us peace with God, sanctifies us and gives us a new delight

in his precepts, causes us to persevere to the end and glorifies us, and ultimately raises our bodies from the dead and with all the saints gives us a place in the eternal tabernacle of our covenantal God that will be with men. The promise of God is certain and is not contingent on the will of man as a condition of its fulfillment.

The promise is only for the elect. In the historical line of the covenant all the children of believers are under the administration of the promise. They all receive the outward sign of the promise in baptism, all are instructed in the truth of the promise, all are under the preaching of the gospel, and all are through baptism admonished of and obliged to new obedience, that is, to cleave to the one God, to trust in him and to love him with their hearts and minds and souls and strength, to forsake the world, to crucify their old natures, and to walk in new and holy lives. However, not all the children of the flesh are children of the promise. The heirs of the promise, according to Hebrews 6:13–18, are only the elect.

That all this is included in the promise of the gospel and that baptism as a sacrament declares and seals that promise to us are beautifully expounded in the first part of the baptism form.

> Holy baptism witnesseth and sealeth unto us the washing away of our sins through Jesus Christ. Therefore we are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. For when we are baptized in the name of the Father, God the Father witnesseth and sealeth unto us that he doth make an eternal covenant of grace with us, and adopts us for his children and heirs, and therefore will provide us with every good thing, and avert all evil or turn it to our profit. And when we are baptized in the name of the Son, the Son sealeth unto us, that he doth wash us in his blood from all our sins, incorporating us into the fellowship of his death and resurrection, so that we are freed from all our sins and accounted righteous before God. In like manner, when we are baptized in the name of the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost assures us, by this holy sacrament, that he will dwell in us and sanctify us to be members of Christ, applying unto us, that which we have in Christ, namely, the washing away of our sins, and the daily renewing of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without spot or wrinkle among the assembly of the elect in life eternal.[11]

According to the baptism form and scripture, the sacrament of baptism has a rich significance. The water of baptism signifies the death of Christ into which we submerge and from which we arise unto newness of life. The water of

baptism symbolizes the blood of Christ, and that blood means that he voluntarily laid down his life and satisfied God's righteousness and made atonement for sin. In that blood we have the remission of sins, the removal of the guilt of sin, and the cleansing from all defilement and pollution of sin. Through baptism we pass through the death of Christ. On this side of that water of baptism there is the guilt of sin and the pollution of corruption, damnation, the world, and death. But as we pass through the water of baptism, we find on the other side righteousness with God and peace, perfect freedom, and the favor and friendship of God in life eternal.

Baptism has a rich practical significance for believers. Through it God seals unto us his promise and assures us that we are as certainly washed by the blood and Spirit from all the pollution of our souls and from all our sins, as we are washed externally with water, by which the filthiness of the body is commonly washed away. Thus baptism serves to strengthen our faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, for faith and baptism are inseparable. To the believer baptism is a means of grace through which the Spirit works for the strengthening of his faith and by which he becomes assured that he is passed from sin into righteousness and from death into life.

The unbeliever cannot lay hold on the promise in baptism. He must despise this sacrament, reveal himself as profane, and aggravate his punishment.

Baptism also implies a serious calling, for our part of the covenant is that we love the Lord our God with our whole heart and our whole being, that we cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and of the spirit, that we walk in newness of life and fight the good fight, and thus we reveal ourselves as those who are of the party of the living God in the world.

LORD'S DAY 27

Q. 72. Is then the external baptism with water the washing away of sin itself?

A. Not at all; for the blood of Jesus Christ only, and the Holy Ghost, cleanse us from all sin.

Q. 73. Why then doth the Holy Ghost call baptism "the washing of regeneration," and "the washing away of sins"?

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

Q. 74. Are infants also to be baptized?

A. Yes; for since they, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them no less than to the adult; they must therefore by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church, and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers as was done in the old covenant or testament by circumcision, instead of which baptism is instituted in the new covenant.

Chapter Three



LORD'S DAY 27

The Sign and Its Meaning

Zacharias Ursinus wrote the following exposition of question and answer 72:

> The same division which we made when speaking of the sacraments in general, is also true of baptism, that there are some forms of speech which are proper, and others which are improper. These forms of speech are called sacramental. It is a proper form of speech when those who receive the sign are said to receive the thing signified, as "he that believeth, and is baptized, shall be saved." The same is true when the sign is said to signify the thing, as when it is said, "baptism is the sign of the washing away of sin." "He gave unto them circumcision to be a sign of the covenant." *Improper* or figurative forms of speech are when the sign is said to be the thing itself, as "Baptism is the washing of regeneration;" and when the sacrament is said to confer the thing, or things pertaining to that which is signified, as when baptism is said to save us. All these forms of speech may be said to have this one signification: Baptism is a certain sign of the remission of sin, and of everlasting life to them that believe: for the figurative speeches which are used in reference to the sacraments are to be interpreted in the same manner as the figurative speeches in reference to the sacrifices. Sacrifices are often called expiations for sin, and yet the apostle Paul affirms that the blood of bulls, and of goats, cannot take away sin. So when it is said, "Baptism saves us," is "the washing of regeneration," and "the washing away of sin;" it is the same thing as to say, Baptism is the sign of all these things.[1]

Ursinus' exposition of question and answer 73 reads as follows:

> There are three reasons which may be assigned why the Scriptures thus

> speak, interchanging the names of the signs, and the things signified. The *first* is on account of the analogy which there is between the sign, and the thing signified. The thing signified is according to its own nature, such as the sign is according to its nature, the opposite of which is also true: for as water which is the sign, washes away the filthiness of the body, so the blood and Spirit of Christ, which are the things signified, wash away the pollution of the soul: and as the minister applies the sign outwardly, so God by virtue of his Spirit applies inwardly the thing signified to all those who receive the sign with true faith. *Secondly*, the Holy Ghost thus speaks for the confirmation of our faith through the use of the signs: for the signs used in the sacraments testify the will of God to us on account of the promise annexed thereto: "He that believeth, and is baptized, shall be saved." But why does the Holy Ghost thus speak for the confirmation of our faith? Because in the proper use of the sacraments the exhibition and reception of the signs, and things signified, are inseparably connected. And hence the Holy Ghost interchanges the terms, attributing what belongs to the thing signified to the sign, and what belongs to the sign to the thing, to teach us what he gives, and to assure us that he does really give it. The *third* reason, therefore, why such language is employed is because the exhibition of the things signified, is inseparably connected with the signs used in the sacraments.[2]

Lord's Day 27 treats two subjects that seem to be wide apart in their significance. One subject is true spiritual baptism in relation to the outward sign of the washing with water; the other is whether infants are to be baptized. Yet these two apparently different subjects can be properly grouped together because there is a connection between them. The connection is that with regard to infant baptism, it is easy for carnal, idolatrous, and superstitious minds to consider the outward washing of the water to be the real, spiritual baptism. A baptized child, as far as we know, has no active faith; at least the infant has no conscious activity of faith with respect to the sign of baptism that is administered. Apparently at the moment of baptism the infant is utterly passive. Baptism is administered to the child, but the infant does not know it, far less appropriates consciously the spiritual significance of the sacrament received. Hence the question can be asked, why do you baptize children? What does it mean when children who do not have the consciousness of living faith, who cannot possibly receive consciously what is signified by baptism—the washing away of sins through the blood and Spirit of Christ—are baptized? What is the significance of baptism for them? Is it possible that without any activity on the part of the child,

the sins of that child are washed away, so that the outward sign, the outward rite, the outward form of baptism, is the washing away of sin?

If you look superficially at the Catechism's question, "Is then the external baptism with water the washing away of sin itself?" you may feel somewhat insulted and think that the question is silly and puerile. Does the Catechism proceed from the idea that in the midst of an intelligent, new dispensational congregation, there would be those who actually think that the outward washing with water can cleanse away sin? It might be all right to ask such questions of little children, but to propose a question of that kind in the congregation seems to be insulting. No one in the church of Christ has ever had the notion that washing with water effects a spiritual washing away of sin and the guilt and corruption of sin and a cleansing of the soul.

However, the Catechism does not refer to such washing with water. It does not simply propose the question whether any water and washing with water cleanses the soul from sin. The question is not whether if you take a bath at home your sins are washed away in the bathtub, as that would seem to be sufficiently absurd. The Catechism refers to the outward washing of baptism. If you are baptized with the water instituted and separated by God, the water of baptism, are your sins washed away by that outward rite?

If you receive on your face, or submerge your body into, the water to which God has divinely attached the promise that as surely as you are outwardly washed with water so surely he will wash away your sins, does that external reception of the sign carry with it the fact that you receive forgiveness of sins spiritually? Is not the water of baptism, the outward rite, the forgiveness of sin itself? If the church as an institute of God, upon the command of God and in harmony with his will, baptizes you with water, are your sins forgiven?

If these questions are put to you point blank, you will answer, "No, of course not: the water of baptism sprinkled on my forehead by the church does not wash away my sins." Yet it is not superfluous to ask question 72 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Our sinful natures are so constituted because of sin and are so inclined to superstition, idolatry, and formal worship, that we readily trust for salvation in things other than the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ, so that we say in our hearts that if we are baptized by the church institute we are saved.

Thus the Jews of the old dispensation boasted of being children of Abraham if they were circumcised, although they were far from being spiritual sons of Abraham. This is often still the case. It is not in vain that the parents are addressed on the occasion of the baptism of their children and are admonished that they should not receive the sign of baptism as a matter of superstition or as an external form and custom.

The theory that baptism as a rite administered by the church is always effective is expressed in the Latin term *ex opere operato*, which means that grace is conferred upon the one who is baptized through the act performed. Baptism therefore has a magical effect. This theory was developed very early in the church's history, especially in connection with the baptism of infants. Even Augustine held the theory that baptism is absolutely necessary to salvation because it removes the guilt of original sin.

Later the Roman Catholic Church fully accepted the theory expressed in the term *ex opere operato*. Not only in the case of infants, but also in the baptism of adults the outward sign is always effective. The church expressed this officially: "If anyone saith, that by the said sacraments of the New Law grace is not conferred through the act performed [*ex opere operato*], but that faith alone in the divine promise suffices for the obtaining of grace: let him be anathema."[3] In Canon 6 this theory is expressed as follows:

> If anyone saith, that the sacraments of the New Law do not contain the grace which they signify, or that they do not confer that grace on those who do not place an obstacle thereunto; as though they were only outward signs of grace or justice received through faith, and certain marks of Christian profession, whereby believers are distinguished amongst men from unbelievers: let him be anathema.[4]

According to the Roman Catholics the grace bestowed on the one who is baptized delivers *ex opere operato* from the guilt of original sin and of actual sins committed up to the time of baptism. It also delivers from the corruption or defilement of sin and from eternal punishment. It incorporates the baptized one into the communion of saints and effects spiritual renewal by the infusion of sanctifying grace.

From all this it should be evident that it is not superfluous to ask, is the external baptism with water the washing away of sin itself?

This question the Catechism answers in the negative. The mere fact that the church administers the outward sign of baptism to you does not mean that your sins are washed away. The mere fact that in an outward sense you are a member of the church in the world does not mean that inwardly and spiritually you are a member of the body of Christ. To have your name on the church roll does not mean that you have your name in the Lamb's book of life. The church register is not an exact copy of the book of life in heaven. It is possible to be externally baptized and to be an external worshiper and an external member of the church, but to have no part with Christ and all his benefits. The apostle Paul wrote in

Romans 2:28–29: “He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.”

Positively the Catechism answers that “the blood of Jesus Christ only, and the Holy Ghost, cleanse us from all sin.”

Even the expression “the blood of Jesus Christ…cleanse[s] us from all sin” is figurative. Blood in itself cleanses no more than water. The blood of Jesus Christ refers to the life of the Good Shepherd that he poured out on the cross. That pouring out of his life was an act of perfect obedience. No one took his life from him, not even when the nails were hammered through his hands and feet. He voluntarily laid down his life. The nails whereby the ungodly fastened Jesus to the cross would have been without effect if he had not accompanied that wicked deed by an act of his own will, whereby he shed his blood drop by drop. Because the pouring out of his life was an act of perfect obedience and love, the blood of Jesus Christ was the perfect sacrifice, the life that was shed in obedience to the Father for the remission of sins.

The blood of Christ alone is able to cleanse us from all sin. There is no other remedy that can cleanse us from sin except that act of perfect obedience accomplished by Christ when he shed his blood and poured out his life.

This is not changed when the Catechism adds “and the Holy Ghost, cleanse[s] us from all sin.” There are two efficient causes for washing away sin, the blood of Jesus Christ and his Spirit. These two are one. There is only one remedy and one power whereby we have the remission of sins and the washing away of our sins and that is the blood of Christ.

But the Spirit of Jesus Christ takes our souls into that blood bath and washes away the guilt of sin to justify us and the pollution of sin to sanctify us. The Spirit takes the blood of Christ and pours it over our souls and completely cleanses us from all iniquity. The Spirit of Jesus Christ applies to us the death of the Savior and causes us to partake of and to appropriate that deed of Christ whereby he poured out his life as a sacrifice for sin, so that it becomes our own by a true and living faith. More than two thousand years ago Christ poured out his life unto death, and by that one sacrifice every last one of the elect was objectively cleansed from sin. The blood of Jesus Christ our Lord cleansed the souls of all the elect from all sin. That is an accomplished fact, and it cannot be made more perfect.

But the blood of Jesus Christ that he shed on the accursed tree must reach our souls. We are born in sin; we are guilty, corrupt, and defiled enemies of God. If the guilt of our sins is to be washed away from our consciences, so that we can

say that we are righteous before God, and if the pollution of sin is to be washed away from our souls in sanctification, the blood of Jesus Christ must be made efficacious and applied to us. That is the work of the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. The blood of Jesus Christ is made efficacious for us by the Holy Spirit.

Of this power of the blood of Jesus Christ to cleanse away our sins, and of this grace of the Holy Spirit whereby he brings our souls into saving contact with the blood of Christ, baptism is a sign and seal. Baptism teaches us that "as the filth of the body is purged away by water, so our sins are removed by the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ" and that "by this divine pledge and sign he may assure us that we are spiritually cleansed from our sins as really as we are externally washed with water."

The act of the Holy Spirit of cleansing our souls from the guilt and pollution of sin is spiritual and invisible. You have never seen a soul washed by the blood of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, it is no less real than the washing of the body with water.

How can we apprehend the reality of the cleansing of our souls unless God brings it in a definite way into our consciousness? He does this by the preaching of the word and the proclamation of the promise and by the sign and seal of baptism. Just as in the preaching of the word he proclaims to our ears that our sins are forgiven forever in the blood of Christ, so in baptism he places the same reality of the washing away of sins before our eyes in a sign and seal. He accompanies the sign of baptism with his sure promise that just as surely as water washes away the filth of our bodies, so surely he washes away the filth of our souls in and through the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Just as the promise of the gospel is not for all but only for the elect, and just as the atonement of Christ is not universal but particular, so also the promise of God as signified and sealed in the sacrament of baptism is not general but particular. It is not for all who are baptized but only for believers, for the elect.

Different Views of the Covenant

Question and answer 74 treat the subject of the ground for infant baptism: "They, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them no less than to the adult; they must therefore by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church." The covenant is the ground for infant baptism, and baptism is a sign of the covenant.

The Reformed doctrine of the covenant since the sixteenth-century Reformation has occupied an important place in Reformed theology and a dominating position in the life of Reformed churches. The doctrine of the covenant is a peculiarly Reformed heritage, more distinctively so than the doctrine of sovereign predestination, for while the truth of predestination is held by other than the Reformed churches, the truth of the covenant was developed exclusively by them.

The development of and emphasis on the truth of the covenant are not to be traced to Calvin as its source, and certainly not to Melanchthon, the synergist, as some would contend, but to Bullinger and the Swiss theologians. Calvin spoke of the covenant both in his insistence on the unity of the Old Testament and the New and in his defense of the baptism of infants, but he did so somewhat in passing.[5] Through contact with Zurich, Olevianus and the Reformed theologians of Germany gave the doctrine of the covenant an integral place in their theology. Through the same contact this truth received a place in the theological system of theologians of Reformed persuasion in the Netherlands, such as Francis Junius, Francis Gomarus, and Lucas Trelcatius Sr. and Jr., and theologians in England, such as Thomas Blake, William Perkins, and James Ussher.[6]

It seems that the development was that the idea of the covenant was applied first to the relation between God and his elect in Christ Jesus and to the way of salvation, and later to the relation between God and Adam in the state of rectitude. The former became known as the covenant of grace; the latter was known by various terms, such as the covenant of works, the covenant of nature, and the covenant of the law.

That in the history of Reformed thought the idea of the covenant of works was developed later than that of the covenant of grace is evident from the Reformed confessions. Some of the earlier confessions, such as the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, speak of the covenant of grace, but they do not mention the covenant of works. Not only are they silent concerning the covenantal relation between God and man in the state of rectitude, but it is striking that in their explanation of original sin they follow exclusively the organic line and omit completely the idea of the imputation of Adam’s guilt to all his posterity.[7] This may be considered all the more important since Reformed theologians generally adopted the creationist view of the origin of the individual human soul. The Canons of Dordt attribute the corruption of the human nature wholly to the propagation of the fallen and corrupt human nature of our first parents. The idea of federal imputation is not so much as suggested. Only the Westminster Confession, which dates from the middle of the

seventeenth century, mentions the covenant of works and in close connection therewith the imputation of original guilt as a basis for the corruption of all mankind.[8] Since that time the idea that the original relation between God and man was covenantal has generally been accepted and developed by Reformed theologians everywhere. The idea of the covenant occupies an essential place in any Reformed system of dogma. Reformed theology is federal theology.

Yet there is not a unanimous opinion among Reformed theologians concerning the idea of the covenant.

There is little or nothing in the Reformed confessions to aid us in defining the idea of the covenant. The Heidelberg Catechism declares only that infants as well as adults are included in the covenant and church of God, but it does not define the idea of the covenant. The Belgic Confession in article 34 condemns

> the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have once received, and moreover condemn the baptism of the infants of believers, who we believe ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as the children in Israel formerly were circumcised upon the same promises which are made unto our children.[9]

The baptism form speaks of "an eternal covenant of grace" that God the Father seals unto us and of two parts in the covenant. Our part is that we are

> obliged unto new obedience, namely that we cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; that we trust in him, and love him with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our mind, and with all our strength; that we forsake the world, crucify our old nature, and walk in a new and holy life.

The form declares that "baptism is a seal and undoubted testimony that we have an eternal covenant of grace with God." Children of believers are said to be entitled to baptism "as heirs of the kingdom of God and of his covenant."[10] All this is significant, but it offers no definition of the covenant.

The Westminster Confession reflects the later development of the idea of the covenant in English theology. It describes the covenant with Adam as something added to his relation to God as creature and as "a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience." It speaks of the covenant of grace as a second covenant "wherein [God] freely offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him that they may be saved."[11] Here is a description of the covenant as something additional and secondary, a way to a certain goal, a

means to an end. It is this idea that has become prevalent in Reformed theology.

The Dutch theologian Petrus van Mastricht defined the covenant as an agreement between God and his people, in which God promises salvation and all the benefits implied therein and demands obedience to his glory. The church on her part promises obedience to God and demands the reward of the promise. According to Mastricht the covenant is strictly bilateral, that is, it has two parties, God and the church, who enter into a mutual treaty.

According to Francis Turretin,

> a covenant denotes the agreement of God with man by which God promises his goods (and especially eternal life to him), and by man, in turn, duty and worship are engaged...This is called two-sided and mutual because it consists of a mutual obligation of the contracting parties: a promise on the part of God and stipulation of the condition on the part of man.[12]

Wilhelmus à Brakel defined the covenant as an

> eternal agreement or treaty between the all-sufficient, good, omnipotent, righteous, faithful, true, and immutable God on the one side, and on the other side with the elect, who by nature are sinful, condemnable, impotent, abominable, hateful, and intolerable. In this covenant God promises deliverance from all evil and the bestowal of full salvation by grace through the Mediator Jesus Christ. Man, fully delighting himself in these promises, with all his heart acquiesces in and accepts the way revealed in the Word of God, whereby these promised benefits are to be obtained.[13]

In more recent Dutch theologians one finds a glimmer of a deeper and richer idea of the covenant. Abraham Kuyper began to emphasize the fundamental truth that God is a covenantal God in himself and that the relation among the three persons of the Trinity is a covenantal relation. He found in this covenantal life of the triune Jehovah the basis for all God’s covenantal dealings with man, and he spoke of the covenant as a relation of friendship in which God eats and drinks with man and speaks with him as a man with his brother, as a friend with his friend. The establishment of the covenant is an act of friendship. Yet ultimately Kuyper did not transcend the idea of the covenant as a means to an end, as an agreement or pact or alliance between God and man. The idea of the covenant, according to Kuyper, is expressed in the definition that it is an alliance between two parties against a third.

Herman Bavinck also emphasized that the covenant rests in the covenantal life

of God himself: “The pact of salvation makes known to us the relationships and life of the three persons in the Divine Being as a covenantal life, a life of consummate self-consciousness and freedom. Here, within the Divine Being, the covenant flourishes to the full.”[14] He even found in the covenant the essence of religion as fellowship with the living God. But ultimately Bavinck considered the covenant as a means to an end, as a way of salvation. “The covenant of grace describes the road by which elect people attain their destiny; it is the channel by which the stream of election flows toward eternity.”[15]

Geerhardus Vos defined the covenant of grace as “the gracious bond between the offended God and the offending sinner in which God promises salvation in the way of faith in Christ and the sinner receives this salvation by believing.”[16]

The identical definition can be found in the writings of F. M. Ten Hoor.

It is not superfluous to devote a line or two to the covenant conception of William Heyns, especially since the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated) favor the same idea of the covenant and have repeatedly appealed to him as an authority on the subject. According to Heyns the essence of the covenant is that God will “be a God unto you.” He wanted nothing of presumptive regeneration. He thought it removed the basis of assurance on which children of the covenant could claim that God established his covenant with them, that he is their God, and that all the blessings of salvation are really theirs. Heyns sought something positive and objective that could be said about and to all the children of the covenant born of believing parents, something that was more than a supposition and was indubitably certain.

This positive, objectively certain ground and essence of the covenant he found in the promise of God, “I will be your God.” That infants as well as adults are comprehended in the covenant of grace means that they have the promise of the covenant. The promise is for all the children of believers, head for head and soul for soul. God, in his part of the covenant, promises to all that he establishes his eternal covenant of grace with them, adopts them as his children and heirs, incorporates them into Christ, gives them the forgiveness of sins and eternal righteousness and life, and through his Holy Spirit dwells in them, applies to them everything they have in Christ, sanctifies them, and preserves them until they will finally be presented without spot or wrinkle among the assembly of the elect in life eternal. Here is something objective, something everlastingly sure—the promise of God.

On the basis of this promise all the baptized children of believers are *really* in the covenant. One does not presume, but one is certain! On the basis of this certainty the promise is for all the baptized children of believers. Moreover, this

promise is not to be identified with an offer of grace, such as comes to all who hear the gospel. It is much more: it is a bequest on the part of God to all who are baptized. God bequeaths to all the children of believers all the blessings of salvation. By baptism he gives them the right by testament to the riches of grace, and he solemnly seals to every baptized child this bequest, this testament, this objective right to the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Inseparably connected with this promise is the command to walk before God and to be upright. The promise is conditional, and the conditions connected with the promise are faith and repentance. On the part of God the bequest is made to every baptized child by promise. In baptism God swears to them all that their names are written in his testament. But the blessings promised are applied only to those who accept the promise by faith.

This view of Heyns is not Reformed, but Arminian. The leaders of the liberated Reformed churches have repeatedly been accused of this heresy, but they emphatically repudiate this accusation. They insist that one can believe and fulfill the covenantal conditions only through grace, and God works grace only in the elect. How they harmonize this with their insistence that on his part God promises the blessings of salvation to every baptized child is difficult to understand.

Heyns presented his solution of this problem:

> [All the children born of believing parents have] subjective grace, which a) is sufficient in connection with spiritual labor bestowed through the means of grace to bring forth good fruits of faith and obedience, so that God judges that he has the most perfect right to expect these; b) does not exclude the possibility to bring forth wild grapes, when in spite of the most excellent labor bestowed upon him, the covenant child remains unfaithful, and therefore does not consist in saving grace; c) does not conflict with the confession that the deepest ground of our salvation lies in election and that salvation shall be the work of God entirely. The outcome will not be the same in all, and the difference will be according to the counsel of God; “the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded” (Rom. 11:7). How God in the ethical sphere executes his counsel without violating man’s moral freedom and responsibility remains for us a profound riddle; d) but makes the covenant member all the more responsible for his remaining unfruitful and bringing forth of wild grapes, and threatens him with a more severe judgment. Scripture teaches accordingly that the covenant child that enjoyed the influence of the work of the gospel is left wholly without excuse.[17]

The view of Heyns in summary is that the promise of the covenant is objectively for every baptized child. All are given the right to the blessings of salvation. The realization of this promise, however, depends on the attitude of the children: they must accept the promise and walk in faith. All receive sufficient grace to comply with the condition, yet in such a way that they can also refuse and be lost.

I do not believe that in general the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated) adopt the view of Heyns concerning a certain preparatory grace. Yet they must still explain how it is possible that God's promise of salvation is to all the children born under the covenant, that God must realize this promise by his sovereign grace, and yet that many covenantal children are lost.

All the definitions of the covenant discussed so far have in common their idea of the covenant as a means to an end and not as an end, the highest end, in itself. They differ only in their denotations of the essence of the covenant. Some say the essence is an agreement, pact, or alliance; others say it is the promise of God; and still others say it is a way unto salvation. They differ too in their descriptions of the parties of the covenant and their relation to each other. According to some the covenant is strictly unilateral; according to others it is completely bilateral; and for others the covenant is unilateral in its origin and bilateral in its operation. Some identify the covenant of redemption, the *pactum salutis*, with the covenant of grace, while others consider the covenant of redemption as the basis for the covenant of grace. Some insist that the covenant of grace is established with Christ; others call it a pact between God and the elect, while still others refer to it as an agreement between the offended God and the offending sinner. But the covenant is essentially a means to an end, a pact or agreement, and the essential elements are always the promise of eternal life and the conditions of faith and obedience.

There are several grave and serious objections against this presentation of the idea of the covenant.

How can man ever be a contracting party with the living God? God is the infinite, eternal, self-existent one. He is the Lord, the absolute sovereign, out of whom are all things. There is none beside him. Man is the creature who owes all that he is and has, body and soul, all his powers and talents, his entire existence, every moment, to his Lord and Creator. God is the fount, and man is the creature who drinks from that fount of all good. God is the all-sufficient I AM; man is completely and constantly dependent for his whole life and existence upon him.

There is no obligation man can assume apart from what is incumbent upon him as a creature, that is, to love the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength every moment of his existence. He can bring nothing to God, for all

the silver and gold and the cattle on a thousand hills are his. Man can do nothing for the Most High, who is perfectly self-sufficient. All the good man has is a gift of grace, of free and sovereign favor, from his God. Even if he loves and serves his Creator, it is a gift of divine goodness for which man owes thanks to God.

How then can the relation of that creature to his Creator ever be or become an agreement or a pact according to which man can merit something higher than he has already attained—eternal life? Shall I make an alliance with the worm that crawls at my feet? Can the man who owes me a thousand dollars merit some other good with me by paying his debt? Can man be a contracting party with the Most High and merit anything with him to whom he owes all? God forbid. The covenant between God and man cannot be a pact, whether we call it the covenant of works or the covenant of grace, with mutual stipulations, conditions, and promises.

Reformed theologians keenly feel this objection, and therefore they usually add that this form of God's dealing with man is due to God's condescending grace and mercy. By grace man is put in a position in which he is a party with God and is able to merit or to attain to some higher good, particularly eternal life. But I object that God cannot deny himself. Even by grace he cannot so condescend to man that man becomes a party next to God, even though the relation is presented as one between a very great party and a very small one.

Man cannot have or receive from God the prerogative to make stipulations and to demand eternal life on the basis of anything whatever that he has done or that he believes. The declaration of the law, "Do this, and thou shalt live," is forever true because obedience is the sole way of God's favor, and in his favor is life. But this does not and cannot mean that by keeping God's precepts man in the state of righteousness could have attained to that higher state of life eternal that is attainable only through the Son of God.

It is true that in the covenant of grace, as in all covenants, there are two parts, and that our part of the covenant is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. But *parts* is not the same as *parties*, and our part in the covenant is not a condition that we must fulfill to enter into the covenant of God or to remain in it. But our part is our expression as moral creatures of the covenantal relation God establishes with us by his grace. The covenant is first established with us through God's part. Our part follows and is the fruit of that gracious act of God.

We never read in scripture of a mutual transaction between God and man, in which God stipulates certain conditions that man accepts, and that by fulfilling them man makes himself worthy of eternal life. The covenant of works is usually described as consisting of a promise, a condition, and a penalty. The promise

was eternal life; the condition was obedience to the probationary command not to eat of the forbidden tree; and the penalty was death. However, scripture does not speak one word in the first three chapters of Genesis about a mutual agreement between God and Adam. It was God who acted and he alone. He planted the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden, and he gave Adam the command, “Thou shalt not eat of it.” The command was not contingent upon Adam’s agreement or consent. He was under the law.

Further, the idea that God promised Adam eternal life if he obeyed this command is pure fiction. Scripture does not speak of or even suggest such a promise. The proponents of a covenant of works deduce the idea of such a promise from the threatened death penalty. They argue that since death was the penalty of disobedience, eternal life was the implied promise. If Adam had remained obedient to God’s command, he would not have died. But this does not imply that he would have attained to eternal life and to heavenly glory. He would have been confirmed in the state of life in which he had been created. Eternal life is a form of fellowship with the living God to which Adam could never have attained. It is a form of life that requires for its basis the union of God and man established in the incarnation of the Son of God and that has its central realization in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. No promise of eternal life was or could have been extended to Adam, nor was the keeping of the probationary command presented to him as a condition unto higher, heavenly life.

The other manifestation of the covenant, called the covenant of grace, is never presented in scripture as a pact or agreement. Uniformly we read that God freely and absolutely established his covenant. After man had violated his covenant, God continued and maintained it, revealing this act of grace in a sovereign declaration, “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). On man’s consent this realization of the covenant depends in no wise. Both before and immediately after the flood God said to Noah that he would establish his covenant with Noah and his seed. The covenant was God’s, and he alone established it: “With thee will I establish my covenant; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons’ wives with thee” (Gen. 6:18). “I will establish my covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth” (Gen. 9:11).

The same expression is used to denote God’s covenant with Abraham: “I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed

after thee" (Gen. 17:7). Through Isaiah Jehovah said to his people, "I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David" (Isa. 55:3). And through Jeremiah God said, "Behold, the days come…that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31; Heb. 8:8–10).

The unilateral character of the covenant is clearly revealed in the vision of Jehovah to Abraham recorded in Genesis 15. Abraham was commanded to take several sacrificial animals, to divide them into halves, and to lay the pieces in rows over against each other. Under the symbols of a smoking furnace and a burning lamp Jehovah passed through the midst of the pieces. The meaning of this ritual of passing between the halves of the sacrificial animals must have been well-known to Abraham. It symbolically expressed that the covenant was inviolably ratified and that he who so ratified it guaranteed it with his life and would rather go through death than ever to annul it. In performing this ceremony both of the covenanting parties usually passed through the pieces because the covenant could not be of one. But in Genesis 15 the Lord alone performed this act, thus indicating that he is his own party and that he alone establishes his covenant. This is probably why *berith* in the Hebrew is usually rendered in the New Testament by the Greek *diathēkē*, which emphasizes the onesidedness of this covenant.

This follows from the truths that the covenant is historically established in the line of continued generations and that infants as well as adults are comprehended in the covenant of God. How could infants be included in the covenant if its establishment was a pact and its realization was dependent on the consent of the covenanting parties? Reformed theologians generally feel that it is absurd to speak of the covenant as an agreement or a mutual alliance between the infinite God and the speck of dust that is man. Therefore they usually admit that the covenant is unilateral in its establishment. If this is true, it depends throughout on God alone. It is not a pact, has no conditions, and God sovereignly performs all that belongs to the establishment and realization of the covenant. He alone sovereignly determines who are to be received into the covenantal relation with him, and on his faithfulness alone it is based. God is faithful, and that is the reason the covenant is eternal. He maintains it, and that is why it cannot be broken. It is an everlasting covenant.

Here is another reason that the scriptural idea of the covenant cannot be correctly represented by those ideas that make it a way to salvation or a means to an end. It is an everlasting covenant: "I will make an everlasting covenant with you" (Isa. 55:3; 61:8). "I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear into their

hearts, that they shall not depart from me" (Jer. 32:40). "I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them: and I will place them, and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore" (Ezek. 37:26). Similarly the baptism form speaks of an "eternal covenant of grace."[18]

A way is not everlasting: when the destination is reached, the way comes to an end. A means is not eternal: when the thing to be effected by it has been attained, the means has served its purpose. An everlasting covenant therefore is not a way or a means but is the destination, the end itself. It is not accidental but essential.

We must therefore look for a definition of the idea of the covenant in a different direction.

The Idea of the Covenant

I agree with Bavinck when he stated that the covenant is the essence of religion in the sense of fellowship with the living God. This is expressed more clearly and concisely by maintaining that the essence of the covenant is fellowship with the ever-blessed God. I also agree with Kuyper's definition of the covenant as an act of friendship, although I would emphasize this idea by insisting that the covenant is essentially a relation or a bond of friendship. Accordingly, the covenant is defined as a living bond of fellowship between God and man that assumes the particular form of friendship.

Friendship is a bond of fellowship and intimate communion of love between persons who differ in personal properties and that is based on the highest possible equality. Friends have no secrets; they enter into each other's life. This is possible only on the basis of equality. Like knows like. True friendship is fellowship, and fellowship cannot subsist between persons who are identical in every respect. They must supplement each other. Perfect friendship is a bond between persons who form a perfect unity that lacks nothing and into which no other person can ever enter. On the basis of equality there must also be personal distinction.

The idea of the covenant is briefly expressed in the term *friendship* or *bond of friendship* between God and man. In that bond God is the friend-sovereign who reveals himself to man, leads him into the secrets of his counsel, opens his heart to him, and causes him to taste his blessed grace. Man is the friend-servant of God who dwells in his house, walks and talks with him, loves him with his whole being, and consecrates himself and all things in the house of God to his praise and glory. Indeed, the covenant is the essence of religion.

The deepest ground of this covenantal relationship between God and man is the triune God. His triune life is the highest revelation of the covenant. God is in himself, apart from any relation to the creature, a covenantal God, for he is one in being and three in persons. The equality of the three persons, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, is absolute, for it rests in the oneness of the divine essence. God is one in being and nature, one in mind and will, and one in all the essential and ethical attributes—in eternity, immensity, immutability, and independence, in simplicity and sovereignty, in knowledge and wisdom, in holiness and righteousness, in grace and beauty, and in love and mercy. Absolutely one and equal are the three persons of the Godhead. In infinite perfection they enter into one another's nature and life. Each knows the others as he is known, yet they are personally distinct and possess their own personal properties, which are expressed in their personal names.

The Father eternally subsists in the divine essence as Father, the Son as Son, the Holy Ghost as Spirit. In their threeness they constitute a completeness, a unity, an exclusive whole or union. They belong together. No other person can be added to that adorable threeness. The Father generates the Son and breathes forth the Spirit unto the Son. The Son is generated by the Father and breathes forth the Spirit unto the Father. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father to the Son as the Spirit of the Father and returns as the Spirit of the Son to the Father. On the basis of that absolute equality by personal distinction, the three persons of the holy Trinity live an eternally perfect covenantal life of friendship. The Father knows and beholds and loves the Son through the Spirit. The Son knows and loves and beholds the Father through the Spirit. The Holy Ghost, searching the depths of God, knows the Father through the Son in himself. The covenantal life of the triune God is the ultimate ground for the covenantal relationship between God and the creature.

That this idea of the covenant is based on the teaching of scripture is not difficult to demonstrate. In paradise God revealed himself to Adam and spoke to him as a friend with his friend, and Adam knew God in the cool of the day. The first creation was concentrated in paradise, the house of God. Paradise had its significant center in the tree of life, the symbol of life in God's fellowship. The whole was concentrated in man, who was placed over the whole house of God to have dominion over all creatures. In the heart of man was the ethical center of the whole creation, and through that heart all creation was united to the heart of God. Adam was the house-servant of God in covenantal friendship.

Of the early saints we read that they walked with God, which denotes intimate fellowship and friendship (Gen. 5:22; 6:8). They talked with God, and God revealed his counsel to them and hid nothing from them (Gen. 6:13; 9:8; 18:17).

Abraham was called the friend of God (Isa. 41:8; James 2:23). The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend (Ex. 33:11).

Moreover, this idea of the covenant was symbolized in the tabernacle and the temple, which expressed the idea of God's dwelling with his people under one roof. The covenantal relation between God and Israel is presented in scripture as a marriage relation, the most intimate of all human relationships, and unfaithfulness and transgression of the covenant is called adultery. The highest realization of the relation of God's people to him in Christ is expressed in the words of the sacerdotal prayer: "I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one" (John 17:23). Almost defined is this idea of the covenant in Psalm 25:14: "The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him, and he will shew them his covenant." The church is the temple of the living God, and she has the promise of God, "I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (2 Cor. 6:16). And the highest realization of God's purpose of salvation is expressed in the words of the great voice out of heaven, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Rev. 21:3). God's covenant of friendship will be realized in its highest heavenly perfection.

Reformed theology is correct when it emphasizes that the reason for and purpose of all the works of God *ad extra* (outgoing) is the glory of God. God wills to glorify himself; his self-glorification is the revelation of all his glorious and blessed virtues in the greatest creaturely measure and on the highest plane. To this will to glorify himself and to reveal himself in all the beauty of his adorable perfections and in all the blessedness of his divine life belongs God's eternal purpose to reveal himself in his blessed covenantal life of eternal friendship. How could this covenantal life of God be revealed otherwise than to and through a people who will have a place in his fellowship, to whom he will reveal his secrets and who will be able to taste his marvelous love and grace?

The triune God therefore, from before the foundation of the world, determined to form a people who would have a creaturely place in the fellowship of the divine family. The covenant of redemption, the *pactum salutis*, the covenant of peace, is the eternal purpose of the triune God to reveal his own covenantal life to the highest degree and on the highest plane by establishing the covenantal relation of friendship between himself and his people.

This required the formation of a people, a creature who would be in the highest creaturely measure like unto himself, because the bond of friendship presupposes a basis of likeness. Hence God in his everlasting counsel determined upon and conceived of a people who would be conformed to the

image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. The first of these covenantal creatures in the divine conception is Christ, the Son of God in human flesh as the resurrected Lord. The risen Lord is the firstborn of every creature in the counsel of God. In him the likeness of God is realized in the highest degree and measure.

This means that I conceive of the counsel of God in a strictly supralapsarian light. History is infralapsarian in its order of events, but God's eternal purpose and good pleasure may not be conceived otherwise than according to the supralapsarian order: what is ultimate in history and in the realization of God's pleasure is first in his eternal counsel. Not the first world, but the new creation is the goal from the beginning, because it is first in the decree of God. Not the first covenant, but the eternal tabernacle of God on a heavenly plane has the first place in the counsel of God. Salvation is not repair work, but the realization of God's eternal pleasure, of him who knows all his works from the beginning. Since all things in the new world are concentrated in the glorified Son of God in the flesh, and he is the head of all things in that new world, and all things were created unto him and for him, I repeat with emphasis that in the eternal good pleasure of God the risen and glorified Christ is the firstborn of every creature. In him God wants to reveal his glory. He is the highest, central realization of the likeness of God that is the indispensable condition for the highest realization of God's covenant of friendship with men. This is the meaning of that marvelous passage concerning Christ,

> 15. who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature:
> 16. For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:
> 17. And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.
> 18. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.
> 19. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell. (Col. 1:15–19)

With Christ the covenant of friendship is first established. In the incarnated, crucified, and resurrected Christ is the highest creaturely likeness of God. To him are given all the elect, the sons whom God wants to lead to glory, that Christ might be the firstborn among many brethren. The elect are chosen in him and unto him, and they are ordained to be conformed to his image, so that the

covenant of friendship, eternally realized in the risen Lord, the head of the church, would be reflected in millions upon millions of the sons of God. Thus all would redound to the praise of the triune God. Unto Christ and his church all things in heaven and on earth are given, for he is the head of heaven and earth. All things must be gathered together in him as the head. In God's counsel the elect are conceived as united in Christ, so that the whole creation is a house of God in Christ and through his church. The covenant of God embraces every creature, and all things must serve the new man in Christ, that he may serve his God.

The rainbow God established in the heavens after the flood is a sign and symbol of this all-embracing idea of the covenant. To the glorious realization of God's heavenly and all-embracing covenant all things that are accomplished and must be accomplished in time are subordinated and made subservient. Creation and the fall, sin and death, reprobation and election—all must serve the realization of God's everlasting covenant of friendship in Christ and his church.

I refer now to the counsel of God not to the order of things in time. If you remember this, you will also discern the sharp difference between this idea and the Barthian idea of the covenant, as presented by Walter Künneth.[19] He expressed a view similar to that presented above, but he refused to proceed from a supralapsarian conception of the counsel of God. He applied the truth that the risen Lord is the firstborn of every creature to creation and its development and left the impression that creation culminates and reaches its perfection in the resurrection of Christ by development and in virtue of an inherent driving force (*Triebkraft*) in creation as originally called into existence by the word of God. To this view we cannot subscribe.

We believe that when God created the first world, he had the second in view. When he formed the first Adam, he did so with a view to the last Adam, the Lord from heaven, the firstborn of every creature. The original creation was an image of the new world that is to come, but it was not its beginning. The first man was the image of the second, but he could never develop into him. The chasm between the two can be bridged only by the wonder of grace that had its central revelation in the incarnation of the Son of God, and through his death in the resurrection and glorification of Christ the Lord. It is not by a driving force in the original creation, but by the irresistible power of the wonder of grace that all things are raised from their original earthly level through the depths of sin, death, and the curse, to the height of glory in God's eternal covenant of friendship.

In the first paradise was the first, earthly realization of the covenant of friendship. That covenant was not an agreement between God and Adam, made

sometime after his creation as something new and additional. It was the living bond of fellowship in which Adam was the friend-servant of God set over God's entire earthly house, so that all things must serve him that he might serve his God. This covenantal relationship functioned on man's part on the basis of his creation in the image of God, that is, in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. As Adam in his nature reflected the nature and virtues of his Creator, so his relation to and life with God reflected from the moment of his creation the life of the triune God.

However, Adam did not regard his exalted position. Through the instigation of Satan, Adam violated the covenant of God and made himself worthy of God's fierce anger, death, and curse. Adam died and became corrupt, dead in trespasses and sins, an exile from the house of God. In him all men, including the elect, the sons of God ordained unto glory, fell into sin and death. There was no way out for man, as far as it lay in his power, for he had destroyed the covenant of God. From man's viewpoint his return to the fellowship of God was forever impossible.

However, man's impossibility is God's medium for the revelation of his glorious grace. He had provided some better thing for us: the perfection of his covenant of friendship in Christ. Adam violated the covenant of God, but God maintained it. Adam and all the elect fell upon Christ, who stood behind them, according to God's eternal good pleasure. God at once revealed his covenant as it is eternally fixed in Christ when he announced that he would put enmity between Satan and the woman and between their mutual seed, and that the cause of the Son of God would have the victory (Gen. 3:15). That covenant was to follow the antithetical line of election and reprobation.

For the revelation of this covenant of Christ in the elect, with its antithesis in the reprobate, the stage was set in all creation. Man was subjected to temporal death and separated from the tree of life. The conception of the woman was multiplied so that Christ could come quickly, as always, and her sorrow would be great. The ground was cursed and produced thorns and thistles. Not only would man eat his bread in the sweat of his face, but he would also eat and drink his own death. The creature was made subject to vanity, so that all real culture by the fallen lord of the earthly creation forever became impossible. On that stage God revealed his covenant, and through that darkness he caused the light of the promise that shines from the resurrection of Jesus Christ to penetrate, filling the heirs of the promise with hope.

God revealed that covenant to Noah and his seed as a covenant that embraces the whole creation, so that also the creature, groaning in the bondage of corruption, can look forward in hope to the glorious liberty of the children of

God. He revealed that covenant to Abraham, his friend, as running in the line of generations, yet as embracing all the nations of the earth. He established that covenant at Sinai, placing it under the law, in order that sin might abound and that under the taskmaster the children of the promise might look the more earnestly for the end (*telos*) of the law in Christ. Through the entire dispensation of that covenant of Sinai the powers of darkness and an adulterous people exerted themselves to violate and to destroy the covenant of Jehovah.

Yet in the fullness of time God realized the covenant of friendship, uniting himself with his people centrally in the incarnation, the Son of God come in the flesh, God of God tabernacling with us, laying the basis of righteousness in the atoning sacrifice and perfect obedience of the Servant of Jehovah, and raising the firstborn among many brethren and the firstborn of every creature from the dead to exalt him at his right hand in heavenly glory. He establishes that eternal bond of friendship in the new covenant through the Spirit of the risen Lord indwelling the church, by whom he writes his law in their hearts, so that they all know him, from the smallest to the greatest.

Still the counsel of God concerning his everlasting covenant is not finished. One more revelation of the wonder of grace is yet expected, when the glorified Son of God will be revealed from heaven and the old things will pass away and all things will be made new. Then he will make our mortal bodies like unto his most glorious body by the power whereby he is able to subdue all things unto himself. Even creation will be delivered from the bondage of corruption to participate in the glorious liberty of the children of God and all things will be made conformable to the glory of the risen Lord. The tabernacle of God will be with men in heavenly glory. As friend-servants in the house of God, a royal priesthood, we will have perfect fellowship with the triune Jehovah, see him face to face, know even as we are known, and taste and declare that the Lord is good forever and ever.

The Ground of Infant Baptism

The Heidelberg Catechism in question and answer 74 treats the subject of infant baptism and gives a threefold ground for it. The Catechism’s argument in favor of infant baptism is, first, that children are included in the covenant and church of God; second, the promise of the covenant is for them as well as for adults; third, baptism as a sign of the covenant, like circumcision, must therefore be applied to them. This is a sound and thoroughly scriptural argument.

Virtually the same ground for infant baptism is offered by the Belgic

Confession.

> We believe that every man who is earnestly studious of obtaining life eternal ought to be but once baptized with this only baptism, without ever repeating the same, since we cannot be born twice. Neither doth this baptism only avail us at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life.
>
> Therefore we detest the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have once received, and moreover condemn the baptism of the infants of believers, who we believe ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as the children in Israel formerly were circumcised upon the same promises which are made unto our children. And indeed Christ shed his blood no less for the washing of the children of the faithful than for adult persons; and therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of that which Christ hath done for them; as the Lord commanded in the law that they should be made partakers of the sacrament of Christ's suffering and death shortly after they were born, by offering for them a lamb, which was a sacrament of Jesus Christ. Moreover, what circumcision was to the Jews, that baptism is to our children. And for this reason Paul calls baptism *the circumcision of Christ*.[20]

Essentially the same argument is followed in the Form for the Administration of Baptism.

> Although our young children do not understand these things, we may not therefore exclude them from baptism, for as they are without their knowledge partakers of the condemnation in Adam, so are they again received unto grace in Christ; as God speaketh unto Abraham, the father of all the faithful, and therefore unto us and our children (Gen. 17:7), saying, *I will establish my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee, in their generations, for an everlasting covenant; to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee*. This also the apostle Peter testifieth, with these words (Acts 2:39), *For the promise is unto you and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call*. Therefore God formerly commanded them to be circumcised, which was a seal of the covenant and of the righteousness of faith; and therefore Christ also embraced them, laid his hands upon them, and blessed them (Mark 10).
>
> 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. And

> parents are in duty bound further to instruct their children herein when they shall arrive to years of discretion.[21]

The Heidelberg Catechism and the quotations from the Belgic Confession and the baptism form represent the official position of the Reformed churches. They hold that children must be baptized because they are included in the covenant of God and therefore are heirs of all the promises of salvation. Whether or not this can be said of all children born under the covenant is a different question that is worthy of a separate discussion. Now it must be established that the Reformed position is that children are and must be baptized because they are included in the covenant of God and the promises of salvation are theirs.

However, something should be added to this. The question naturally arises, why are children included in the covenant of God? The answer to this question must be that God establishes his covenant in the line of continued generations. There is only one people of God, the true seed of Abraham, throughout the ages in both dispensations.

It is important, especially in opposition to the view of the premillennial Baptists, who reject the scriptural truth of infant baptism, that we see this point clearly. The deepest reason that all Baptists reject the baptism of infants is their failure to recognize the truth that the people of God are one and the same throughout all ages and that the same covenant is established with them and with their children throughout their generations in both dispensations.

According to the premillennialist there are two peoples of God, two different seeds of Abraham: the Jews and the church, natural Israel and spiritual Israel. The Jews are the real and natural Israel, with special privileges, a special promise, a separate covenant for them only, and a special future. Earthly Jerusalem, Mount Zion, the throne of David, the temple, and the land of Canaan is meant for the Jews as an everlasting possession. They are and will be the real and true Israel forever, the proper seed of Abraham. Believers in the new dispensation are called the seed of Abraham in a figurative, spiritual sense. Of them the apostle spoke in Galatians 3.

However, this view is erroneous and contrary to scripture. The word of God knows only one seed of Abraham: the spiritual seed, the elect, the children of the promise. This is true in the old dispensation and in the new. It is incorrect to say that in the old dispensation the Jews were the seed of Abraham and in the new dispensation believers are Abraham’s seed. To put it emphatically and concisely, the Jews never were the seed of Abraham. It is correct to say that for a time the seed of Abraham were found exclusively among Abraham’s descendants, as they are found now among all nations. But scripture never identifies Abraham’s

descendants with the seed of Abraham. The children of the promise are at all times only the believers. In the old dispensation they were found in the generations of Seth, Noah, Shem, Abraham, and Israel. In the new dispensation the children of the promise are among all nations, and there is no difference between Jew and Gentile. But wherever they are found, the children of the promise, named after Abraham as the father of believers, are always the true children of God, the believers. These and these only are the seed of Abraham.

I will now prove this contention from the word of God. We naturally turn first to Romans 9:6–8:

> 6. Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.
>
> 7. Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, in Isaac shall thy seed be called.
>
> 8. That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.

There can be no doubt that in these verses and in the context the apostle referred to the Jews of the old dispensation. Further, the apostle distinguished between those who are *of* Israel and those who *are* Israel. The people as such, the nation, were all *of* Israel, but even in the old dispensation that was not Israel. They were all of the seed of Abraham according to the flesh, yet they were not all the true, spiritual seed. Moreover, only spiritual Israel, believers, those born not of the flesh but of the promise, that is, by the power of that promise, as Isaac was, are counted for the seed. When the Lord spoke of the seed of Abraham, we must not make the mistake of applying this word of God to the Jews *per se*. It does not mean the Jews but only the true Israel, the children of the promise. They and they only are the seed of Abraham. Therefore the Jews were never the seed of Abraham, although the seed of Abraham for a time were Jews.

Next we consider Romans 4:11–16:

> 11. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also:
>
> 12. And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised.

13. For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.

14. For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect:

15. Because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression.

16. Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all.

It is not possible or necessary to give a detailed explanation of this rich passage of scripture. It is necessary only to point out the salient points in the passage that prove my contention that not the Jews but believers are the true seed of Abraham in both dispensations. Abraham is here pictured as the father of all believers, those of the circumcision (the Jews) and those of the uncircumcision (all nations). The believers are the seed of Abraham, whether they are of the law or of faith. Further, only in that sense is Abraham the father of circumcision: not all who are of the circumcision, that is, who are circumcised in their flesh, are the true seed of Abraham, but only those among them who believe. Abraham is the father of circumcision, that is, "to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised" (v. 12). Moreover, to this one seed there is one and the same promise that with their father Abraham they will be heirs of the world. Those who are of the law and of the flesh are not heirs of the promise at all, but only those who are of the faith of father Abraham, who is the father of us all. One father Abraham, one seed of Abraham, one promise, and one way to obtain the promise, the way of righteousness by faith—such is the clear teaching of this passage of scripture.

Another passage is Romans 2:28–29: "He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God." This passage is clear and speaks for itself. It teaches plainly that the mere Jew was not the seed of Abraham, was not a real Jew. A real Israelite was one in whose heart was present the spiritual reality corresponding to the sign of circumcision, that is, faith. Here too it is emphasized that not the Jews are the seed of Abraham. They never were. Only believers are.

Perhaps the clearest statement of the unity of the people of God in the old dispensation and in the new is found in Galatians 3 and 4.

> 7. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham.
>
> 8. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed.
>
> 9. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham.

16. Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.

17. And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect.

18. For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise: but God gave it to Abraham by promise.

19. Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.

20. Now a mediator is not a mediator of one, but God is one.

21. Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law.

22. But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given them that believe.

23. But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed.

24. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

25. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

26. For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

27. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

28. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

29. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal. 3:7–9, 16–29).

1. Now, I say, That the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all;

2. But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father.

3. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world:

4. But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,

5. To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

6. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.

7. Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. (Gal. 4:1–7)

I can only accentuate the main points of these passages insofar as they apply to the truth that only believers in both dispensations are the true seed of Abraham. First, the apostle taught that essentially and centrally the seed of Abraham is Christ and he only. This truth the apostle emphasized in Galatians 3:16, where he argued from the use of the singular “seed” rather than the plural *seeds.* The seed of Abraham is Christ. Second, if Christ is centrally the seed of Abraham, only those who are in him can be seed with him, whether they are of the old dispensation or the new. This the apostle taught in Galatians 3:7: “Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham.” Third, the entire passage emphasizes that there is one promise for the one seed of Abraham and that, therefore, believers are the only heirs of the one promise, as the apostle wrote in Galatians 3:29: “If ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” Fourth, the apostle compared the church of all ages in both dispensations to a growing child. In the old dispensation the heir was a child under the tutorship of the law. In the new dispensation he has grown into an adult, a son, who has received the inheritance. The point is that the church of the old dispensation and the church of the new are likened unto one person. When a child grows into an adult, does he become a different person, or is he the same individual developed?

Therefore the clear teaching of the word of God is that there is only one

people of God; that this people of God is called the seed of Abraham in Christ; that therefore the seed of Abraham is not the Jews *per se*, neither the Gentiles *per se*, but believers with faithful Abraham both of the Jews and of the Gentiles. The unity of the church of all ages is incontrovertibly established.

The same result—the unity of the church of the old dispensation and the church of the new—is yielded by a comparison of some passages of the Old Testament to others of the New Testament. Compare Hosea 1:10–11 with Romans 9:24–26. Hosea prophesied,

> 10. Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered; and it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God.
>
> 11. Then shall the children of Judah and the children of Israel be gathered together, and appoint themselves one head, and they shall come up out of the land: for great shall be the day of Jezreel.

This passage relates to the ten tribes of Israel and is a prophecy of a great and glorious restoration, in which Israel will be changed from being called Lo-ammi (not my people) into being called the sons of the living God. Paul in Romans 9:24–26 did not hesitate to apply Hosea's prophecy to the church of the new dispensation.

> 24. Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles.
>
> 25. As he saith also in Osee, I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved.
>
> 26. And it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people; there shall they be called the children of the living God.

Such an application of Hosea could not be made except on the thoroughly scriptural basis of the unity of the church in the old dispensation and in the new.

The same truth is evident from a comparison of Jeremiah 31:31–34 with Hebrews 8:6–13. Jeremiah prophesied that the Lord will make a new covenant with Israel and Judah.

> 31. Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah:

> 32. Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD:
>
> 33. But his shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.
>
> 34. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Hebrews quotes this passage that speaks so plainly and specifically of Israel and Judah with application to the church of the new dispensation. Such application can be understood only on the truth that the church of both dispensations is one and the same.

The unity of the church is further evident from a comparison of Amos 9:11–15 with Acts 15:13–17. Amos prophesied,

> 11. In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old:
>
> 12. That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the LORD that doeth this.
>
> 13. Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt.
>
> 14. And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them.
>
> 15. And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of their land which I have given them, saith the LORD thy God.

When you read this passage, you cannot escape the impression that it is nothing but a prophecy of a literal restoration of Israel to its own land. Yet in Acts 15:13–17 we read:

> 13. After they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me:
>
> 14. Simeon hath declared how God at first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name.
>
> 15. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written,
>
> 16. After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up:
>
> 17. That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.

While Amos prophesied the restoration of the tabernacle of David, of Israel's possession of all the heathen, of Israel's return to their land, and of their everlasting possession of it, James in Acts 15 explained that the restoration of the tabernacle of David is fulfilled in the new dispensation when the Gentiles enter into the fellowship of Christ.

Scripture speaks the same language throughout. Always it presents the people of God as one. Consistently it teaches that although there is a difference between the two dispensations, the church is essentially the same in the old dispensation and in the new.

How otherwise could Christ claim to have the key of the house of David (Isa. 22:22; Rev. 3:7)? How otherwise can it be explained that scripture so plainly teaches that Jerusalem and Mount Zion are not destroyed but are realized in the new dispensation, while only the shadows of them are gone forever (Isa. 28:16; Rom. 9:33; Gal. 4:25–26; Heb. 12:22; 1 Pet. 2:6; Rev. 3:12; 21:2, 10)? The same is true of the temple, altar, holy place, sacrifices, and high priests (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:18–22; Heb. 9:1–12, 21–24; 10:19–21; Rev. 3:12). Canaan, which was promised to Abraham and his seed and will be their everlasting possession, is not the earthly country near the Mediterranean Sea, but the heavenly country that is to come, when the new Jerusalem will come down upon the new earth. Such was the hope of the patriarchs of old, as we read in Hebrews 11:8–10, 13–16:

> 8. By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.
>
> 9. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the

same promise:

10. For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

13. These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

14. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.

15. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned.

16. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

In short, the whole word of God teaches the unity of the people of God and of all that pertains to them. All the promises are in Christ, and through him they are for the true seed of Abraham of all ages, that is, the believers.

The truth that there is one people of God in both dispensations, the true seed of Abraham, the seed of the promise, has been explained and emphasized. The next step in the argument in favor of infant baptism is that there is essentially one sign of the covenant, although its form changed in harmony with the two dispensations, in which circumcision was the sign of the old covenant and baptism is the sign of the new. Although the sign differs in form it has essentially one meaning.

The Reformed churches have always held this truth, and correctly so, for it is an important and necessary link in the chain of the scriptural argument for infant baptism.

The Baptists' objection against the baptism of infants is unscriptural. They draw it from their minds. The objection is that baptism is a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith, of the forgiveness of sins, and of regeneration. Therefore it may be administered only to known believers, that is, to those who confess their faith. Many baptized as infants prove in later life that they are not children of God at all and go lost. For this reason the Baptists claim that it is wrong to administer the sign of baptism to children of believers before they come to years of discretion.

Against this argument many objections can be brought, but the chief objection is that the Baptists' argument is directly against scripture and therefore against the Lord. What they urge against baptism holds in its full force against infant

circumcision. Yet the circumcision of infants is directly enjoined by the Lord regarding the seed of Abraham in their generations.

Circumcision was a sign of righteousness by faith—of spiritual circumcision, of the circumcision of the heart, of regeneration and sanctification, of the cutting away of the old man of sin, and of the love of God in a new heart. In all these respects the significance of the old covenant sign is the same as of the sign of baptism. The identity of the two signs, though they differ in form, I will prove from the word of God.

First, I call attention to passages that refer only to the sign of circumcision. “If they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, with their trespass which they trespassed against me, and that also they have walked contrary unto me; and that I also have walked contrary unto them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity: then will I remember my covenant with Jacob.” (Lev. 26:40–42). It is evident here that an uncircumcised heart is the same as a heart that will not confess sin and iniquity. To be uncircumcised in heart is to be unconverted, to be ungodly. By implication this means that a circumcised heart is a regenerated and converted heart, from which there arises sorrow over sin and confession of iniquity.

Of such a heart circumcision was a sign. In this respect circumcision had the same significance as holy baptism. “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked” (Deut. 10:16). This is plain language. Circumcision was a sign of a sanctified heart. Again it is plain that circumcision and baptism have the same significance. “And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live” (Deut. 30:6). Again it is plain that circumcision is a sign of the work of God’s grace in the heart, whereby the heart is filled with the love of God. It is therefore a sign of the same grace that is signified in baptism. In Jeremiah 4:4 we read, “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskin of your heart, ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem.” In the language of the New Testament this is the same as saying, “Put off the old man of sin and put on the new man that is renewed after the image of God in true righteousness and holiness.” Circumcision was a sign of the putting off of the old man of sin, and the same is true of the sacrament of baptism.

Romans 4:11 presents circumcision as sealing the righteousness by faith: “He received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith, which he had yet being uncircumcised.” God seals in the sign of circumcision that he justifies believers by faith and counts their faith for righteousness.

Second, I compare with the above passages those that speak of the significance of holy baptism. “Peter said unto them, Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ and for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 2:38). Baptism is a sign of the remission of sins or of righteousness by faith. The same is taught in Acts 22:16: “Why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” In Romans 6:4 we read, “We are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” Baptism, like circumcision, is the sign of renewal in Christ. In baptism we die with Christ, and we rise with him in newness of life and walk. The same is expressed in Galatians 3:27: “As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Baptism is the sign of putting on Christ, that is, of being renewed in him.

Third, there are also passages in scripture that identify circumcision and baptism. In Colossians 2:11–12 the apostle plainly identified the signs of baptism and circumcision with respect to their significance. He wrote to the church of the new dispensation that believers are circumcised spiritually and that this spiritual circumcision took place when they were buried with Christ in baptism. “In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.” The most direct proof that circumcision and baptism have essentially the same meaning is Philippians 3:3: “We are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.” Although the apostle did not mention baptism, he maintained that not the Jews but the church of the new dispensation in Christ Jesus is the circumcision. Essentially circumcision has not been discarded but continues in the church of the new dispensation.

Those who deny that infant baptism is a biblical doctrine often attempt to dispute the statement in the baptism form that circumcision has been replaced by baptism in the new dispensation. Baptists refuse to be convinced that baptism has come in the place of circumcision.

Yet nothing is more evident from the scriptures. For a time baptism and circumcision existed side by side, especially in Jewish Christian communities. Circumcision tried to maintain itself alongside of baptism, but this proved to be impossible, and circumcision was forced to surrender its place in the church. When baptism came circumcision had to be discarded.

Why did baptism force circumcision out of the way? Because the word of God

plainly teaches that baptism has essentially the same significance as circumcision. Two signs with the same meaning cannot exist side by side in the church. Since circumcision belonged to the time of shadows, it must make room for baptism as the sign of fulfillment. If one still insists that circumcision is necessary for the Christian church, he can do so only because he attaches significance to it as an element of the law and seeks the righteousness of the law. Thus Christ is of none effect to him. So true it is that baptism—being essentially the same sign and having the form proper to the new dispensation—has come in the place of circumcision that the apostle could write that we are circumcised when we are baptized and that we are the true circumcision.

The Heidelberg Catechism bases its argument for the baptism of infants on their inclusion in the covenant and church of God and the promise to them of redemption from sin by the blood of Christ and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith.

How are infants included from their birth in the covenant of God? They are in the covenant because God establishes it in the line of continued generations. The ultimate ground for the baptism of infants is that God establishes his covenant in the line of continued generations. The will of God plainly revealed in holy scripture is that the seed of Abraham, which is the same throughout the ages, must receive in their generations the sign of righteousness by faith.

It is the plain truth of scripture and verified in the history of the church of God in the world from the beginning that God causes his people to develop in the line of generations. Always he organically establishes his covenant in the line of generations. This is evident from the protevangel in Genesis 3:15: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” This is clear from the establishment of the covenant with Noah: “Behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you” (Gen. 9:9). This truth is revealed in Genesis 17:7: “I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.”

This is evident from the entire historical line of development. The line of God’s covenant runs in the line of the generations from Seth to Noah, from Shem to Abraham, from Abraham to Israel, and from Israel to Christ. Also in the new dispensation it is plain that God has his people in the line of continued generations, which is why the apostle Peter could preach on Pentecost, “The promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:39). When the Lord calls those afar off, it is equally true for them that the promise is unto them and to their children.

Only in this light can it be understood that we read repeatedly in the scriptures that households were baptized. The keeper of the prison took Paul and Silas "the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway" (Acts 16:33). Paul said, "I baptized also the household of Stephanus: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other" (1 Cor. 1:16). The question is not whether or not there were little children in those houses but that households, families, were baptized. The organic idea of the covenant, running in the line of continued generations, is expressed in these passages. God deals not with individuals but with generations to establish his covenant. Everywhere in scripture children are considered as belonging to the church of God in both dispensations. God always establishes his church in the line of continued generations.

Does this mean that all the children according to the flesh in those generations are real, spiritual children of God, the real seed of Abraham?

There are always those who teach that the baptism of infants is based upon the presupposed regeneration of the children of believers, that is, they suppose that infants are regenerated and therefore ought to be baptized.

Even Ursinus in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism seemed to suggest this doctrine. In his commentary he met the following objection of those who opposed infant baptism:

> Those who do not believe, are not to be baptized; for it is said, 'He that believeth and is baptized,' etc. But infants do not believe. Therefore, they are not to be baptized. Faith is necessarily required for the use of baptism, for he that believeth not shall be damned. But the sign of grace ought not to be given to such as are condemned.[22]

This objection he answered as follows:

> The first proposition is not true, if understood generally; for circumcision was applied to infants, although they were not capable of exercising faith. It must, therefore, be understood of adults only, who are not to be baptized except they believe. Neither can our opponents say of adults that they certainly do believe. If infants, therefore, are not to be baptized because they do not believe, then neither are those to be baptized who have arrived to years of understanding, because no one can certainly know whether they have faith or not. Simon Magus was baptized, and yet he was a hypocrite. But, say our opponents, the church ought to be satisfied with a profession of faith. This we admit, and would add, that to be born in the church is, to

> infants, the same thing as a profession of faith…Faith is, indeed, necessary to the use of baptism with this distinction. Actual faith is required in adults, and an inclination to faith in infants. There are, therefore, four terms in this syllogism, or there is a fallacy in understanding that as spoken particularly, which must be understood generally. Those who do not believe, that is, who have no faith at all, neither by profession nor by inclination, are not to be baptized. But infants born of believing parents have faith as to inclination. We also deny the minor proposition; for the infants do believe after their manner, or according to the condition of their age; they have an inclination to faith. Faith is in infants potentially and by inclination, although not actually as in adults. For, as infants born of ungodly parents who are without the church, have no actual wickedness, but only an inclination thereto, so those who are born of godly parents have no actual holiness, but only an inclination to it; not according to nature, but according to the grace of the covenant. And still further: infants have the Holy Ghost, and are regenerated by him. John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb, and Jeremiah is said to have been sanctified before he came out of the womb. (Luke 1:15; Jer. 1:5). If infants now have the Holy Ghost, he certainly works in them regeneration, good inclinations, new desires, and such other things as are necessary for their salvation, or he at least supplies them with every thing that is requisite for their baptism, according to the declaration of Peter, "Can any man forbid water to them who have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" It is for this reason that Christ enumerates little children amongst those who believe, saying, "Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me" (Matt. 18:6). In as much now as infants are fit subjects for baptism, they do not profane it as the Anabaptists wickedly affirm.[23]

It seems that Ursinus based infant baptism on the presumption of regeneration in the children of the covenant. We do not deny that infants can be regenerated or that it is possible for them to have the faculty or power of faith. Just as little children have the power to think, although they cannot actually think; just as little children have the power of speech, although as yet they cannot speak, so also it is possible that the Holy Spirit gives unto little children from their birth the power of faith and regenerates them in their earliest infancy. We even believe that it is the usual mode of God's working to regenerate little children from their infancy in the church of Christ. But this does not mean that baptism is based on a presupposition or on presumptive regeneration. We cannot state as a fact that all the children of believing parents are regenerated. Scripture plainly teaches the

opposite. Not all are Israel who are of Israel. There is chaff among the wheat. There are many carnal children among those born of believing parents. We certainly cannot and may not presuppose what is so obviously contrary to scripture and to all reality.

There are also in the Reformed churches those who want nothing of presumptive regeneration as a basis for the baptism of infants, but who ground infant baptism in the promise of the covenant: I will be your God and the God of your seed. The motive of those who adhere to this theory is a certain assurance for all the children born of believing parents. They seek certainty. On the basis of a presupposition or presumptive regeneration there is no assurance possible, say they. According to those who hold the theory of presumptive regeneration the covenant is established only with the elect. One must first know that he is elect before he can have the assurance that he belongs to God's covenant. The best one can do on this basis with respect to covenant children is to presume or suppose that they are in the covenant. There is no assurance.

Hence they reject this entire conception. They want no distinction between an external and an internal covenant or between being really and not really in the covenant. They refuse to speak of suppositions and presumptions, and they seek objective certainty. This certainty with respect to the covenant of God they find in the promise: I will be your God and the God of your seed. This promise all the covenant children may accept. It is sure. It cannot fail. On it they can rely. It is a sure basis of certainty and personal assurance of faith, and at the same time it is the only ground of infant baptism.

According to this view the promise is for every child born under the covenant, for all the children of believing parents, for all who are baptized. In the promise God bequeaths all the blessings of the covenant upon all who are baptized. He gives everyone the right to those blessings. One may say therefore to all baptized children, "You are really in the covenant. You have the right to accept the promise."

It stands to reason that since scripture and experience plainly teach that all baptized children are not saved, the promise must be presented as conditional. It is contingent for its fulfillment on the faith of those who are baptized. They are obliged to believe the promise, and to fulfill their covenantal obligations, their part of the covenant of God. If they fail in this, the blessings of the covenant do not actually come into their possession. Instead they fall under the terrible covenantal wrath and vengeance of God.

With this view we cannot agree. This view does not establish the assurance of which it boasts, that is, the objective certainty that according to the promise of God all who are baptized are really in the covenant and have a God-given right

to its blessings.

Those who teach this view speak of a conditional promise. The condition on which the promise is contingent is faith and obedience. Many Reformed theologians have erroneously presented faith as a condition to salvation and to entering into the covenant of God, but they emphasize that God fulfills all conditions unto salvation. If we say that our actual reception of the blessings of the covenant is conditioned by faith, we must hasten to add that God himself gives us the faith. He himself fulfills the condition. The fulfillment of the condition of faith is included in the promise.

If those who teach that the promise of God is for all baptized children would be consistent, they must come to the conclusion that all baptized children are actually saved. To everyone God promises the blessings of the covenant. To everyone he promises his grace and Spirit. To everyone he promises the lively faith whereby they become partakers of the blessings of the covenant. The promise of God is sure. Hence all baptized children are surely saved. The sign and the seal of this they receive in baptism. The inevitable conclusion is that all the children born under the covenant are surely saved.

Those who maintain this theory of a promise of God for all realize very well that this position is untenable. They understand very well that scripture plainly teaches that many born under the covenant are irretrievably lost. Besides, experience teaches that many baptized children are not saved. Thus they must come to the conclusion that a conditional promise to all is a condition that baptized children themselves must and are able to fulfill.

This was the view of William Heyns. He maintained that to every baptized child is given sufficient subjective grace to bring forth good fruits, which are the fruits of faith and repentance. According to him all covenant children receive sufficient grace either to accept or to reject their covenant obligations.

> There is therefore a subjective grace which a) is sufficient in connection with the spiritual labor through the means of grace to bring forth the good fruits of faith and obedience, so that God has the fullest right to expect these; b) which, however, does not exclude the possibility that the covenant child even in spite of the most excellent influences of the means of grace (Luke 13) remains unfruitful, produces rotten grapes, and which therefore definitely does not consist in saving grace; c) which is not in conflict with the confession that the deepest ground of our salvation lies in the election of God and that salvation is entirely the work of God.[24]

The distinction between baptized children and others is that baptized children

receive sufficient grace to accept the covenant and to bring forth fruits of faith and repentance, although they can still refuse to do this. This is pure Arminianism and Pelagianism applied to the covenant. Besides, with this view the desired certainty for all the children of the covenant is not attained, because the covenant is contingent upon the will of the sinner. And that means that ultimately it is impossible of realization.

This view is in plain conflict with the teaching of the baptism form. The expository part of the form establishes the whole of God's covenant and all its benefits as absolutely sure unto the children of the promise. It is not conditional. God's part of the covenant is that he realizes it completely, both its objective establishment and its subjective application. God assures the children of the promise that he establishes his covenant with them, adopts them for his children and heirs, forgives them all their sins and justifies them, delivers them and sanctifies them, and preserves them until they appear with all the elect in life eternal.

This is not a conditional promise but is absolutely unconditional. If there were a condition attached to this, the covenant could not be realized. But God's work is never conditional, and it is not contingent on the will and the work of man. The language of the baptism form is as positive and unconditional as it possibly can be.

Heyns emphasized that in the expository part of the baptism form the Holy Spirit is presented as *willing* to dwell in us and to apply to the children of the promise all the benefits of salvation, but whether this willingness of the Holy Spirit will be realized depends on the faith and obedience of the covenant children. But this is not the meaning of the baptism form. The fact that the future tense is used in connection with the work of the Holy Ghost (he *will* dwell in us) no more makes the Holy Spirit's work contingent and conditional than when the same tense is used with respect to the Father's work (he *will* provide us with every good thing). On the contrary, it denotes that God the Holy Spirit will fulfill this promise in the future, in all our lives, as well as in the present.

Therefore we cannot accept the theory of a conditional promise for all baptized children living under the dispensation of the covenant.

The truth is not that the ground of infant baptism is a certain presumptive regeneration or a promise of the covenant for all who live under the dispensation of the covenant. The scriptural ground for infant baptism is that God establishes his covenant in the line of continued generations. In those generations there are children of the promise and carnal children who never receive the blessings of the promise and who trample underfoot the covenant of God.

Thus it was in the old dispensation when the covenant of God was confined to

the nation of Israel. They formed one nation. They all lived under God's dealings with his own. They were all delivered with a mighty arm from the house of bondage. They were all witnesses of God's terrible wonders. They "all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and did all eat the same spiritual meat; and did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them" (1 Cor. 10:1–4). They were the nation that received the law, to whom the word of God was entrusted, whose were the prophets, the priests, the kings, the service of the temple, the altar, and the sacrifices.

Yet with the majority of them God was not well-pleased. There were in the generations of the people of God of the old dispensation two seeds: the true children of the promise and the carnal children who despised God's covenant and trampled underfoot the holy things of the covenant of Jehovah, his word, and his precepts. Yet it was the will of God that all received the sign of circumcision, the seal of righteousness by faith.

It is no different in the new dispensation. The church in the world is the gathering of confessing believers and their children. They form one people, even though the course of God's covenant is no longer confined to one nation. To this people God reveals his covenant. They are called after his name. Outwardly all who belong to them are subject to the same dealings. All are according to the will of God baptized in the name of God triune. To all the word is preached. All, unless they violate the covenant of God before they ever come to confession of faith in the church, celebrate the death of the Lord Jesus Christ at the communion table. To the church of the new dispensation apply the words of Romans 9:6–8:

> 6. Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel:
>
> 7. Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called.
>
> 8. That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.

Always in the line of the generations of the people of God is the true spiritual seed. But there also develops the carnal seed who live in close proximity and outward fellowship with the spiritual seed, dwell in the same house with them, and are subject to the same influences, but who are not children of the promise and receive not the grace of God in their hearts.

The significance of the presence of the carnal seed within the generations of the people of God is evident from scripture and actual experience. Because of the perpetual presence of the carnal element in the church of Christ in the world, the church must fight her hardest battle in her own house and not on the mission field. By this carnal element the measure of iniquity is filled, and from the carnal seed the antichristian power is constantly developing, until the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, the culmination of all the forces of iniquity. In the carnal seed sin is manifest in all its horror. They kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to them. They crucify the Christ and always crucify him anew. They bring forth the false church. With them the children of the promise are engaged in continual spiritual warfare until the days of the great tribulation, when the elect would be deceived if the days were not shortened for their sake.

Thus it is according to the will of God revealed in his word that the sign of baptism is to be administered to all the children born in the line of the generations of God's people.

While the sign and seal of the covenant is a savor of life for the children of the promise, it is at the same time a savor of death unto death for the reprobate who trample underfoot the covenant of Jehovah.

We must watch, therefore. We must not say, "We have Abraham to our father." For all are not Israel that are of Israel, neither are they children of God because they are of Abraham's natural seed. Never say that the word of God has fallen out, for God certainly realizes his promise to all his people. His word never fails.

It is our calling, our sacred obligation, our responsibility before God, to walk as spiritual children of the covenant and to keep our part of that covenant, namely, that we love the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength; cleave unto him; trust in him as the God of our salvation; forsake the world; crucify our old naturs; and walk in new and holy lives.

NOTES

Chapter One: LORD'S DAY 25

[1] The first Dutch edition, published in 1602, was titled *Het schat-boeck der christelycke leere; ofte uytlegginghe over den catechismus; ende verclaringhe der besonderste hooftstucken der christelijcke religie / van doctor Zacharias Ursinus eertijts in de universiteyt van Heydelbergh int Latijn voorgelesen; ende nu nieuwelijcx ten dienste der Nederlantsche gemeynten also overgeset, dat dit werck den ghemeynen man nu mede dienstich can wesen* [The treasure-book of Christian doctrine; or interpretation of the catechism; and explanation of the most special chapters of the Christian religion of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus, formerly delivered in Latin in the University of Heidelberg; and now recently also translated by Festus Hommius in the service of the Dutch congregations, so that this work can be of service also to the common man] (Leyden: Andries Clouck, 1602). Whenever I speak of or quote from the *Schatboek*, as the work is generally known, the reference is to Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Columbus: Scott & Bascom, 1852).

[2] Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 340.

[3] In the 1940s a disagreement arose in the *Gereformeerde Kerken* (Reformed Churches) in the Netherlands regarding Klaas Schilder's views on these subjects. The eventual result was a schism in the Reformed churches in 1944, which led to the formation of what are now known as the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated).

[4] Herman Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte* [Calling and regeneration] (Kampen: Ph. Zalsman, 1903), 111–12. All translations from *Roeping en Wedergeboorte* are mine.

[5] Canons of Dordt 2.5, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 163.

[6] Abraham Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*: *Toelichting op den Heidelbergschen Catechismus* [In accordance with the prayer of Dordt: Explanation of the Heidelberg Catechism], 4 vols. (Amsterdam: Hovëker and Wormser, 1904–5), 2:n.p. My translation of the Dutch.

[7] Canons of Dordt 3–4.11, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 168.

[8] Canons of Dordt 3–4.12, in ibid., 167–68.

[9] Canons of Dordt 3–4.17, in ibid., 169–70.

[10] Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 26–27.

[11] Ibid., 33–34.

[12] Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 370.

[13] Form for the Administration of Baptism, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 260.

[14] Form for the Administration of the Baptism, in ibid., 258.

[15] Belgic Confession 33, in ibid., 67.

[16] First Helvetic Confession 20, in Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1966), 107.

[17] Second Helvetic Confession 19, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 3:884.

[18] Second Helvetic Confession 19, in ibid., 3:885.

[19] Second Helvetic Confession 19, in ibid., 3:886–87.

[20] Second Helvetic Confession 19, in ibid., 3:887–88.

[21] French Confession of Faith 34, in Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, 156.
[22] French Confession of Faith 36, in ibid., 156–57.
[23] French Confession of Faith 37, in ibid., 157.
[24] Scots Confession of Faith 21, in ibid., 179–80.
[25] Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England 25, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:502.
[26] Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England 27, in ibid., 3:504–5.
[27] Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England 28, in ibid., 3:505.
[28] Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England 29, in ibid., 3:506–7.
[29] Anglican Catechism in ibid., 3:521–22.
[30] Irish Articles of Religion 85, in ibid., 3:541.
[31] Irish Articles of Religion 88, in ibid., 3:541–42.
[32] Irish Articles of Religion 89, in ibid, 3:542.
[33] Irish Articles of Religion 92, in ibid.
[34] Irish Articles of Religion 94, in ibid., 3:542–43,
[35] Irish Articles of Religion 95, in ibid., 3:543.
[36] Irish Articles of Religion 96, in ibid., 3:543.
[37] Westminster Confession of Faith 27.1, in ibid., 3:660.
[38] Westminster Confession of Faith 27.2, in ibid., 3:660–61.
[39] Westminster Confession of Faith 27.3, in ibid., 3:661.
[40] Westminster Confession of Faith 28.1, in ibid., 3:661–62.
[41] Westminster Confession of Faith 29.1, in ibid., 3:663–64.
[42] Westminster Confession of Faith 29.5, in ibid., 3:665–66.
[43] Westminster Confession of Faith 29.8 in ibid., 3:666–67.
[44] Form for the Administration of Baptism, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 260.

Chapter Two: LORD'S DAY 26

[1] First Helvetic Confession 21, in Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, 108.
[2] Second Helvetic Confession 20, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:889–90.
[3] Belgic Confession 34, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 68–69.
[4] French Confession of Faith 35, in Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, 156.
[5] Scots Confession of Faith 21, in ibid., 179–80.
[6] Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England 27, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:504–5.
[7] Anglican Catechism in ibid., 3:517–18, 521.
[8] Irish Articles of Religion 89, in ibid., 3:542.
[9] Westminster Confession of Faith 28.1–7, in ibid., 3:661–63.
[10] Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Seventh Session, On Baptism 1, in ibid., 2:122.
[11] Form for the Administration of Baptism, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 258.

Chapter Three: LORD'S DAY 27

[1] Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 364–65.
[2] Ibid., 365.
[3] Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Seventh Session, Decree on the Sacraments in General 8, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:121.
[4] Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Seventh Session, Decree on the Sacraments in General 6, in ibid., 2:120–21.
[5] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.10, 1:429–48;

4.16, 2:1325–55.

[6] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2006), 210.

[7] See Belgic Confession 15; Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 7; and Canons of Dordt 3–4.1–3, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 40–41, 85, 166–67.

[8] Westminster Confession of Faith 6.3, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:615.

[9] Belgic Confession 34, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 69.

[10] Form for the Administration of Baptism, in ibid., 258–59.

[11] Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1–3, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:616–17.

[12] Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1992–97), 1:574.

[13] Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1992), 1:429.

[14] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:214.

[15] Ibid., 3:195.

[16] Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. and ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. vol. 2, *Anthropology* (Bellingham WA: Lexham Press, 2012–14), 92.

[17] W. Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma Co., n.d.), n.p. All translations from *Catechetiek* are mine.

[18] Form for the Administration of Baptism, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 258.

[19] Walter Künneth, *Die Theologie der Auferstehung* [The theology of the resurrection] (München: Claudius Publishing House, 1951).

[20] Belgic Confession 34, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 69–70.

[21] Form for the Administration of Baptism, in ibid., 259.

[22] Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 369.

[23] Ibid., 369–70.

[24] Heyns, *Catechetiek*, 144–45.