Calvin Theological Seminary Forum

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Baptism

Fall 2008
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

When we are little children we grow into a world that has been there before we were. We inherit a world. We don’t invent our world; we discover it. We enter a world that already has bike racing and barn dancing; it already has Land’s End and L.L. Bean. We’ve already had a lot of Middle East war and peace. We already have love and marriage, and it’s a good thing, too. In our own families all kinds of arrangements were there before we arrived, so that when we are born into a family or adopted into a family we simply receive these arrangements and live off them.

This is how it is with the kingdom of God. Jesus says that unless we receive the kingdom of God like a little child we will never enter it (Luke 18:17). We inherit the kingdom that was there before the foundation of the world. We don’t invent God’s kingdom; we discover it. It’s before us and behind us; it’s above us and beneath us. We can’t step out of the sphere of God’s loving power any more than we can step out of the universe.

That’s why a baptism is so eloquent. A baby’s baptism says to us that, while we are still infants, God’s grace comes to us from events way back in the history of redemption. Once upon a time Israel went down into the Red Sea and came up on the other side because God stretched out a mighty arm. Once upon a time Jesus Christ went down into death and came up out of Joseph’s tomb in a second Exodus that restarted the movement of God’s people toward the promised land. Once upon a time the Holy Spirit was poured out on disciples and the Christian church started to sound like a league of nations.

Children of believers are born or adopted into these events. Baptism is a way of saying to a child, “You are a child of these events and of all that they mean. You aren’t just your family’s child. You’re an Exodus child. You’re a resurrection child. You’re a kingdom child. And all because Jesus Christ was a Christmas child.” Every baptism is a sign to us, whether of babies, college students, or born-again truck drivers who are receiving the kingdom of God like a little child.

This issue of Forum is about baptism. Take and read.

Grace and peace.
We gathered at Advocate Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn, Illinois, around noon. Each of us scrubbed up, put on a gown, and then walked into the busy room full of little babies and large equipment. Anneke was lying quietly in her little bed, no blanket, no cute jammies, just some wires and oxygen tubes and a little diaper. We crowded around Anneke’s bed, and the nurses gave me their standard baptism kit: a white bib with an embroidered gold cross, a certificate for me to fill out, a tube of sterile water, and a tiny shell.

Shells are an ancient symbol of baptism because they were used like ladles in the early church to scoop the water onto the believer. The shell that I was given was more like a tablespoon than a ladle, thankfully.

Once we had all of the props and all of the people, I read Psalm 131 and Romans 6, and I asked Kevin and Melanie the same questions I asked them this morning and they gave the same answers. Then I squirted a little water in the shell and I said, “Anneke Miller Hogeterp, I baptize you into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.” And I blessed her then, like I blessed her this morning. We held hands around her bed and through our tears we prayed for this little child of God.

It was a time none of us will forget. But all of us will also remember that as beautiful as that time was, it wasn’t quite right.

It wasn’t quite right because it wasn’t right here, with all of you. I could ask the questions of Kevin and Melanie, but I couldn’t ask the question of you. I could hear their answer, but you couldn’t, and they couldn’t hear your answer. And your role in a baptism is just as important as the parents’ role.

We believe baptism is not just about the baptized person. Anneke’s baptism wasn’t just about Anneke, it was also about you. We believe that when a person is baptized, that person is baptized into the covenant community of God. Baptism is a corporate event. God says, “I am your God.” And we say, “We are your people.” We don’t say, “Anneke is your person.”

This is because we believe that baptism replaces the sign of circumcision given to God’s people in the Old Testament. The sign of circumcision said that this little one was a part of the people of God. Circumcision was not about the individual, it was about the people of God. It was about God’s promises to his people: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.”
Remembering Baptism

In the same way, we believe baptism is not about the person, but about the people. Baptism is about welcoming this child into the covenant community, a community that is shaped by the promises of God. So it is right and fitting that we present little Anneke to you this morning, and let you hear the promises of her parents, and let her parents hear the promises of God’s people, and to remind all of us of the promises of God.

A few months ago I worshipped at a large church in California. It was an evening service, and as the service began, the pastor said that following the worship service there would be a few baptisms outdoors in the small heated pool they had for such occasions. My immediate internal response was, “After the service? You’re going to do this after the service? And whoever wants to stay around can?” Well, I was intrigued, and decided to stay.

There were three people to be baptized that day: a middle-aged woman, a teen-aged girl, and a twenty-something young man. One by one they walked down the steps into the little pool and stood by the pastor. He gave a brief introduction of each person to the small crowd, and then turned toward the person and asked three questions. All of the questions had to do with this person’s individual relationship with Jesus. There was no question about the Bible, no question about the church, no question addressed to the people there. I had to strain my ears to hear the questions and the answers—and the people were only ten feet away from me.

I found all of this interesting, but what really caught my attention was when this pastor baptized the middle-aged woman. He stood with his arm around her and said, “Sherry1 was baptized as an infant, like I was, but that was not a baptism she chose.” He looked at Sherry with just a bit of pity in his eyes and she shook her head, as if to say, “Oh no, Pastor Bob, I didn’t choose that baptism.”

“So today Sherry is being baptized out of her choice; she is choosing God on her own.”

And as I watched him dip her back into the water, the questions flooded my head: She is choosing God on her own? Her previous baptism was not a baptism she chose, so somehow that made it invalid?

We believe that baptism isn’t about choice. Baptism isn’t about you. Baptism is about God and God’s promises and God’s people. We don’t choose baptism, most of us, because we don’t choose God. God chooses us.

Because we approach baptism as an act of the covenant, because we understand it as a replacement for circumcision, because we believe that baptism is a corporate event, and because we believe that the ultimate choice belongs to God, we administer the sacrament of baptism to infants, we administer it once, and we administer it within the worship of the people of God.

Now, this does not mean that those people who were baptized in the pool of the big California church have it all wrong and are going to have to pass a Reformed baptism quiz in order to get to heaven. It does not mean that those who practice adult baptism (or believer baptism, as it is sometimes called) should be looked down on by those of us who baptize infants. We should not cluck our tongues at them and sigh and hand them a copy of the Canons of Dort or the Heidelberg Catechism. Even though they do not approach baptism in the way that we do, they are still baptized; and because they are baptized into the triune name of God just as we are baptized into the triune name of God, they are our brothers and our sisters. They are part of the people of God. They are a part of us.

As Paul says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3-4). In baptism, however it is administered, we are united with Christ. We are baptized into his death; we are baptized into his resurrection.

The blessing of the Reformed approach to baptism is that it reminds us of the sovereignty of God—it reminds us of the covenant, it reminds us of the long history, the deep heritage we have as the people of God, stretching back to Abraham, reaching back to the Garden.

But the challenge of our approach comes when these little ones grow and instead of walking in newness of life, instead of living as people who rejoice in their baptisms, they wander. They get tired of church, or angry at it, or angry with God, and they leave us. They leave the worshipping community of the people of God. Sometimes it is a conscious choice. Sometimes it’s made out of laziness or apathy. But it doesn’t matter, because it hurts us no matter how it happens.

We can remember baptisms of children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, children of this congregation, when the little one looked so small and beautiful and the water was poured and the promises made and the hymns sung, and years later, the child is no longer in our pews. That hurts us. That doesn’t just hurt the mom and the dad, that hurts the Sunday School teacher,

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1 Not her real name. “Pastor Bob” isn’t his name either.
and the Cadet counselor, and the youth
group leader. That hurts all of us. Because
all of us made promises, because all of us
were present, because all of us care, we
all hurt when a child, however old, is no
longer among us.

We wonder then about baptism, we
wonder about dying and rising, we wonder
about the staying power of the water. And
we may even dare to wonder about the
promises of God. Are they true? Do they
last? Do they apply to my child?

The promises of God are true, and
lasting, and through baptism God has
extended them to everyone who has been
baptized into his name.

But baptism is not a guarantee. We do
not believe that all who have been baptized
automatically go to heaven. Circumcision
was not a guarantee of heaven. neither is
baptism a guarantee of heaven. Baptism is a
sacrament which marks a person as part of
the people of God. Baptism creates a com-
nunity in which the promises of God are
spoken and sung and celebrated. Baptism
reminds us, every time we do it, that God is
in charge of life and death, and we are not.

The stories of the people of God tell
again and again how the people of God
go through waters of death and into life.
Noah and the flood, the Red Sea, the
Jordan River. Again and again they must
cross the water to move into the land, to
receive the promises, to find new life. The
waters that should kill them, that should
separate them from God and his promises,
are instead transformed—they are split
wide open so that the people of God can
walk through. Through death, into life.

When we are baptized, we are baptized
into the death and resurrection of Jesus
Christ. Just as the people of Israel moved
through the waters to the fulfillment of
the promises, we move through the waters
of baptism into the promise of new life.
“When you pass through the waters,” says
Isaiah 40, “I will be with you. When you
pass through the rivers, they will not
sweep over you.”

On Monday I went swimming with
my nephew, Ryan, who just turned seven.
Ryan enjoys the water and is becoming a
good swimmer, but Ryan, like most of us, I
think, is not a big fan of going under with-
out fair warning. So when he was on my
back and we were getting ready to plunge
under the surface, he would tell me, “Don’t
go under until I’m ready.” So I would wait
and he would say, “Not ready. Not ready.”
And then he would say, “Ready!” and take
a big breath and I would dive under the
water with him holding on tightly with
both hands. I would swim underwater for
a few seconds, and then bring him up for
air, and we would do it all over again.

Water can be dangerous if you’re not
ready. Life can be dangerous if you’re not
ready. There are many rip tides that seek
to pull us away from what seems safe and
secure. There are big waves that can knock
us flat when we’re not looking.

We find ourselves holding tightly to
the promises of God, as tightly as a seven-
year-old who trusts his aunt to bring him
up for air, and as the waters swirl and foam
around us we know, because of baptism,
that no matter what happens, the promises
of God are ours, and they are real, and
they are forever.

So we hold on tightly as we hold our
breath, going through seasons of dying
when it seems we will never rise, like
when a child goes wandering, or a loved
one faces death, or depression cripples our
spirit. We hold on tightly to the promises
of God, we hold on tightly to the people
of God, we hold on tightly to the truth of
Romans 6, that all who have been united
with Christ in a death like his will cer-
tainly be united with Christ in a resurrec-
tion like his.

And so we hang onto the promises,
and as we discover how they are ful-
filled through the brothers and sisters who
care for us, as they are fulfilled through
the Christian community throughout all
times and places, as we find our lives as
individuals—as a body—more and more
shaped by the promises of God, we allow
ourselves slowly, eventually to rest in God’s
care, to rest in his arms, to quiet our souls,
like a weaned child with its mother.

People of God, sisters and brothers:
remember your baptism, and be thankful.

Note: Anneke Miller Hogeterp died of
cardiac arrest on November 14, 2002, at
the age of five months.
Grace Abounding
A Conversation on Baptism

Note: For this issue of the Forum we gathered a group to talk about just what happens in the sacrament of baptism and what that means from then on out for the one who receives the sacrament. The conversation was moderated by Scott Hoezee, Director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching, and included President Neal Plantinga, Professor of Systematic Theology John Bolt, Dean of Students Richard Sytsma, and Professor of Worship John Witvliet.

Hoezee: When you grew up, if your parents talked to you about your baptism or when you saw other people baptized, what did you think? What were you told happened when a baby was baptized? Also, did your parents remind you often that you were baptized, and did any of you know your date of baptism?

Bolt: Not the date, but in terms of being reminded of baptism, yes. And also at different faith stages along the way I was reminded of it, very definitely.

Plantinga: When I was in junior high, we got a new minister who had an unmistakably tender tone in his voice whenever he baptized an infant. That struck me. I was perhaps twelve and I couldn’t formulate it precisely, but his voice sounded deeply loving.

Sytsma: My parents didn’t say anything about the date of baptism, but I know I was baptized in the First Christian Reformed Church in Denver. When I went back to Denver periodically, that was a special place for me. One of my special memories as a young person was making profession of faith with my sister and my “adopted” sister, who had been our maid in Japan. She was now making profession of faith but was baptized, too, and so the connection between baptism and profession of faith was right there with the three of us.

Hoezee: I grew up more or less thinking that baptism was all about promises. God promises, the parents promise, the congregation promises. After that, the idea was almost, “Well, now the promises have been made, so we’ll sit back and see what happens in the future. If we do our best and raise this child in the Lord, then this child may love God back and that will complete the circle.” But later, when I started reading our confessions, I was struck by how much more God-active language the confessions use. Belgic Confession Article 33 tells us that in the sacrament, what we see symbolized on the outside, God does inwardly. God works in us through the power of the Spirit. Then in Article 34, we are told that this working of God applies equally to adults or infants and that baptism is profitable not only when the water is on us but throughout our entire lives. Reading that gave me the idea that something was actually happening on the inside of the person being baptized. So the question is: What is God’s action in baptism?

Plantinga: One of the problems here is that both the creeds and the standard Reformed commentators like Louis Berkhof sometimes speak as if baptism is the sign and seal of regeneration or spiritual rebirth in this person. I think that’s not right. It is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace in which God’s gracious work does happen. But you can’t individualize it or you either have to presume regeneration or think that baptism itself regenerates. I think we are a lot safer and more accurate to think that what God does in baptism is to mark a child as belonging to the covenant of grace,
which also means then the Church, which also means then the kingdom of God. So yes to all of the things you say, Scott, but we ought not individualize it because then we’re saying that every infant who gets baptized happens also to be elect.

Bolt: It’s striking that Calvin has his discussion of baptism in the fourth book of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The point of that fourth book is the external means that God uses to bring us in and keep us in the company of his people. Now baptism is special, of course, but this act is ordained, by Christ himself, as a means by which God does something. And, therefore, I think your point about not trying to find the exact inner reference is correct. My analogy is to think of it as a very serious birth certificate. If a child is born to American citizens in the United States of America, then that child is an American. Getting a birth certificate signed, sealed, and properly documented is the proof of that. That’s got to be taken seriously. It’s a way of authenticating something. Likewise, baptism is God’s ordained act of declaring our citizenship in his kingdom.

Sytsma: I like that, but I just wonder what you do with Titus 3:5, “the washing of regeneration”: “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the reception of that through an act of faith, which is of the Holy Spirit.”

Bolt: Well, we have to maintain that baptism is not the same as election. The covenant promise of baptism is not the same as saying we are sure this person is elect or regenerate. We don’t know that. But at the same time we do know that the only way to be fully in God’s favor is through the washing of rebirth and the reception of that through an act of faith, which is of the Holy Spirit.

Witvliet: Cultural context is key here. For Calvin, in the sixteenth century, the big pastoral worries were primarily about superstition. The worry was that baptism would be thought to produce an act of the Holy Spirit automatically, so all of the weight of the Reformation was placed against this impression. The aim was to guard our profound awareness of the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. Our physical action does not automatically limit God’s sovereignty with respect to election or any other action. But in our day, I worry about an opposite pastoral problem: namely, the inability to perceive that God acts in and through human action in the sacraments. The sacraments are God-ordained actions. When we do what God has charged us to do, we can be assured that God will be at work. We need to think of baptism as this occasion when God is at work, when God is active, when God is there nourishing the congregation, feeding the congregation, calling the congregation. If we were to really think through the implications of that in baptism and the Lord’s Supper, we’d experience quite a conversion of the imagination. That’s a conversion I am eager to emphasize.

Plantinga: I think it helps us also to take a long historical view of the history of redemption. What you are saying to a child is, “You are not just a Witvliet child, you are a child who comes from creation and fall and exile and exile and incarnation and atonement and resurrection and ascension and Pentecost—these are your events. You are a child of these events and of everything that they mean, and God is now publicly marking you as a child of these events.”

Hoezee: So the opposite ends of the spectrum are relatively easy to mark out: On the one side is a view that this is sheerly a symbol of something that would be true whether we did it or not; on the other side is the view that baptism equals regeneration, automatic salvation, either through the sacrament or as a result of it. Those are the extremes. Somewhere in the middle is where some interesting questions come up on exactly what John Witvliet was just saying in terms of the action of God. So at least we can say this baptized child is a member of this covenant community. But that much could be confirmed at a dedication. So what’s the difference? Unlike a dedication, we say baptism is a sacrament, that there is a direct work of God. So exactly what is that divine action?

Plantinga: But that’s a key. A key is who is offering what to whom? If it’s a dedication, then it’s parents offering a child. If it’s an infant baptism, then it’s God marking a child as belonging to the whole history of redemption and to the people that they have generated. As John Bolt says, it’s a certificate of belonging.

Sytsma: Baptism is done under Christ’s authority. He commanded us to baptize. He said, “I have been given all authority,” and so the goal of the disciples in baptizing was to respond as his representatives. It is Christ working through us.
Yet, many Japanese don’t think they need to be baptized because they don’t think of themselves as sinners. To them, sin equals crime. “Sin” and “crime” are the same word in Japanese. They think, “I am not a criminal; therefore, I am not a sinner and so I don’t need to have my sins washed away.” Or a sin is a little dust that collects on the mirror of the soul and all you need to do is brush it off. You don’t need to be washed. So baptism is kind of a stumbling block. They don’t think they need it. There are a lot more people who identify with Christianity as their preferred religion than there are people who are actually baptized Christians.

Witvliet: I wonder if we too narrowly restrict our use of scriptural imagery in our nearly exclusive use of washing imagery. The Heidelberg Catechism is appropriately strong on the washing imagery, but there are so many other images for baptism, including the imagery of rebirth, the imagery of drowning, the dying with Christ and rising with Christ imagery. Each image conveys different things. Another way to understand the sixteenth century and the Reformation is to remember that for medieval Catholics baptism was seen as the washing away of original sin [the condition of sin that marks all humans as a result of Adam’s first act of disobedience]. Then for sins after that there had to be a different sacrament of forgiveness, which is penance. For me one of the most illuminating portions of Calvin’s writing on baptism is when he discusses penance near the end of Book Four of the Institutes. Calvin says, yes, we have to deal with post-baptismal sin, but we don’t have penance for that. Instead, our answer for post-baptismal sin is, simply, baptism itself! In a related passage, Calvin explained that baptism was a sign of justification [the act of God whereby humans are accounted just and free from guilt or penalty of sin] and sanctification [the act of God’s grace by which humans are purified and made holy]. That to me is a powerful message and one I wish were more clearly understood.

Bolt: Well, the Catechism says that too. What is it to be washed with the blood of Christ? To have forgiveness of sins but also to be renewed by the Holy Spirit so we may more and more die to sin and lead holy lives (Q&A 70). I think you are right, John. We don’t allude frequently enough to the dying and rising that’s involved in baptism as something that’s ongoing for us.

Witvliet: That is why I think that baptisms should be recalled constantly in the life of the church. In some congregations, baptismal identity is actively recalled every single week during the confession/assurance part of the worship service. Funerals are another powerful moment to recall baptismal identity. Classic funeral liturgies have begun with Romans 6:3-4. That is a powerful way to begin a funeral! We remember the identity of this person as one who was buried with Christ and raised in baptism. There is often not nearly that kind of strength in contemporary funerals, and it would mean a lot to recover that.

Plantinga: That hooks up well with Colossians 2 and 3. Colossians 2 has the imagery of having been baptized into the death of Christ, and Colossians 3 says, “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, … set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.” Then everything that follows—put off anger, wrath, malice; put on compassion, kindness, humility—all of that is sort of the Christian’s new uniform, the family uniform for the people of God. There it appears that the putting off and putting on is the fitting lifelong response to the knowledge that we were baptized.

Hoezee: All of that leads us to an acute pastoral situation that all of us in one way or another have encountered, and that is the sad mom or dad, grandma or grandpa, whose child or grandchild was baptized and raised in the church but has now turned away. Maybe this child even says that he or she wants nothing to do with Jesus. And so these hurting parents or grandparents come to you as a pastor. On the basis of baptism, can pastors offer a word of hope about baptized children who may have wandered to the far country? Are we able to offer a word of hope based on the wayward child’s status as baptized? Is there a word of hope based on baptism that we would not be able to offer if there had been no baptism for this wandering child?

Bolt: The quick and easy answer to that is yes. I think it takes a great deal of care in how one formulates that. We cannot offer false hope or false assurance, but the definitive answer to that pastoral question is yes.

Plantinga: I am also impressed by the simple fact that we do not know other people’s hearts. We do not know who’s a hypocrite and we don’t know who is more godly in his heart than his mouth would ever let
We do have to hold out the possibility that Can a human nullify baptism?

Hoezee: Many churches, including Lutheran churches that came out of the Reformation, have water at the head of the main aisle in their sanctuaries for people to dip their hands into as they enter church as a reminder of baptism. Christian Reformed congregations don’t have that practice as part of their history. But would that be a way to keep baptism before us more regularly?

Witvliet: I think that’s a pastoral decision. If we could see it as a way of encouraging people to sense their baptismal identity, then I think that could be very legitimate. Similarly, I think it’s possible to use water inside a baptismal remembrance service at Easter, provided that the congregation will not perceive the action as a kind of rebaptism.

Hoezee: One of the most pastorally crucial moments I had in my last church was the youth service we held about five weeks after 9/11. At the end of the sermon, I called all of the high schoolers and middle schoolers to the baptismal font. I dipped my hand into the water and let them all see water running through my fingers. I then told them that in those post-9/11 weeks, we knew better than ever what a dangerous world this is. I told them that the government and Homeland Security cannot keep them safe, nor could we keep them safe as a church. But that was exactly why we had baptized all those kids once upon a time. It is a dangerous world, but that’s why we send them into the world as baptized children of God. That’s our security.

Bolt: I think that is a wonderful example.

Witvliet: For many Forum readers, I suspect that one issue in this area has to do with requests many pastors are getting to perform re-baptisms. This is a very significant pastoral issue. I think that many pastors are struggling with what to do, and the confessions are very clear about the impropriety of re-baptism. I heartily endorse that. Re-baptism can so easily send a message that God has somehow not kept his promises signed in the first baptism, or that the church that performed the first baptism is not legitimate. But I think there is much more that we could do to celebrate reaffirmations of faith as a renewal of baptism, to celebrate them in a dramatic, gracious, and life-giving way that matches some of the splendor of baptism itself.

Sytsma: You mentioned faith in relation to baptism, and since I come from Japan where most baptisms were adult baptisms, we always talked about faith as a response that was necessary. I would compare baptism to a wedding where vows are exchanged and rings are exchanged and then try to draw some parallels to the covenant. Is that in your mind legitimate?

Witvliet: Yes. And throughout this conversation the language I am hearing is “grace, grace, grace.” This is God’s act. It is true that vows are a huge part of the baptism liturgy. But I like the move the Scottish Presbyterians made a few years ago when they put the vows of parents after the actual act of baptism rather than before. Our promise comes in response to God’s action. The idea is that this is all God’s gracious action—an action that we can receive in gratitude.
The Baptism of Babies
What Does the Bible Say?

Picture it: A Sunday worship service in church. The baptism font is clearly visible. Parents who believe in Jesus Christ present an infant child for baptism. The minister’s moistened hand moves from the basin of water to the head of the child, and the baby is declared to be baptized “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.” An awesome experience. But is it biblical?

The Unity of Scripture and the Covenant
Baptizing the babies of believing parents is clearly biblical if we affirm the unity of the Bible. Sixty-six books, two Testaments, but one Bible. Each book and each Testament has its own character, but the message of God’s redeeming love in Christ is the thread that moves from the beginning to the end. In the Old Testament, animal sacrifices and ceremonies foreshadowed the blood sacrifice of Christ. Old Testament prophets foretold the coming of the Anointed One. In the New Testament Jesus affirmed the bridge between the Testaments when he told the gathered congregation in the synagogue, “Today this Scripture (from Isaiah) is fulfilled in your hearing.” The New Testament books are filled with quotations from the Old Testament. In Romans 4:16-17 and Galatians 3:6-9 Paul added further evidence to the continuity between the Testaments when he identified Abraham as the father of all who believe. Romans 11 pictures the New Testament church as a graft into the tree of Old Testament Israel, making the Old and the New one family of God in Christ.

The story begins when God established his covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:1-14). In that covenant God promised to be faithful to Abraham and his descendants, and they were to “walk before (God) and be blameless.” As a sign of that covenant arrangement, God told Abraham that he, every male in his household, and every male child who was eight days old was to “undergo circumcision.” You would think that God would have told Abraham to instruct his children in the faith so that when they came to years of understanding they would make their own personal commitment to “walk before (God) and be blameless,” and then receive the covenant sign of circumcision. But that’s not the way it went. God wanted even the youngest to have on their bodies the sign of his covenant with his people.

That is the way it went for centuries of Old Testament history. When Christ came his sacrifice fulfilled the bloody sacraments of the Old Testament, and he instituted new sacraments for the church. The covenant that God established with his people in the Old Testament is not cancelled in the New Testament, but rather finds its continuity through the blood of Christ—which he described as the “blood of the covenant” (Mark 14:24). What is essential to God’s story in the Old Testament remains essential to God’s story in the New Testament. No longer the bloody Passover, but now the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. No longer the bloody sacrament of circumcision, but now the command of Christ to baptize. No longer the patriarchal culture of the Old Testament in which only male believers and their sons were to be circumcised. But now the culture of the New Testament in which there is neither “male nor female for (we) are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). In Christ all believers and their children, even their infant children, are under God’s covenant and therefore are to receive the sacrament of baptism.

Imagine yourself as a first-century Christian. Behind you is a tradition of thousands of years in which infant circumcision was not questioned. Now your baby has just been born. You know that circumcision is no longer required. The apostles Peter and Paul have made that clear (Acts 10:44-11:18; Rom. 3:27-31; Gal. 5:6). You also know that baptism is required according to the command of Christ (Matt. 28:18–20). On the basis of the letter that Paul wrote to the Colossians, you understand that in Christ both circumcision and baptism are essentially the same. Both are signs of cutting away or washing away our sin, marking us with the sign of God’s covenant (Col. 2:11-12). So you naturally figure that your infant should receive the sacrament of baptism just as the infants of your ancestors received the sacrament of circumcision. It is a basic rule of the covenant: If the parents are believers, then their infant children are included in the covenant, and therefore they are to receive the sign of covenant membership.

Related Scriptures
This idea is also reflected in a variety of related Scriptures. God’s covenantal attitude toward little children is mirrored...
in the care that Israel was instructed to provide for their children (Deut. 4:39-40; 6:4-9; Prov. 22:6). Jesus honored little children when he “placed his hands on them and prayed for them” (Matt. 19:13-14) and set them up as examples of what we must become to “enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:2-4). Peter’s Pentecost sermon declared that “the promise is for you and your children” (Acts 2:39). In 1 Corinthians 7:14 Paul argued that children should receive baptism as an adult. The same thing should happen today. The same thing should happen today. Christian missionaries call the unbeliever the infant child at the font of baptism. But surely God has the freedom to speak the infant of their love for her and their hopes for her future. What is to prevent them from doing the same in baptism?

Three Problems

If infant baptism were an unmistakable mandate of Scripture, proven by text and example, all Christians would agree that the infant children of believing parents should be baptized. The fact that not all Christians see it that way raises at least three problems that demand attention.

Problem One: The baptism of Jesus.

Jesus was baptized as an adult. Isn’t that the model that we ought to follow? But Jesus was also circumcised as an infant. To press the example of Jesus suggests that only those who are circumcised in infancy should receive baptism as an adult. The example of Jesus does not require that baptism be administered only to believing adults. But neither does it forbid the baptism of infants.

Problem Two: “Repent and believe.”

Both Peter (Acts 2:38) and Paul (Acts 16:14-15) challenged their hearers to repent, believe, and be baptized. But Scripture consistently records that when the Holy Spirit opened the hearts of those who heard and understood the gospel, these new believers and their households were baptized (Acts 16:15; 16:33; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16). The same thing should happen today. Christian missionaries call the unbeliever to faith. When the convert repents and believes, that person and her children, even if they have not yet come to years of understanding, are baptized. This is the pattern of the New Testament.

Problem Three: There is no example in Scripture of a baby being baptized.

That is true. In the missionary setting of the New Testament there is no example of a baby who was baptized. However, neither is there an example in Scripture of the child of believing parents who had to wait until she attained a certain level of understanding before she could receive the sacrament of baptism. An example, or a lack of an example, is secondary to the teaching of Scripture that includes the infant children of believing parents in God’s covenant family.

Baptism as God’s Visible Word

For centuries the Church has understood the sacraments as a “visible word” of God’s grace. Baptism is not our word to God. It is God’s word to us. Although in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper the verbs are active (we must “take, eat, remember, believe”), in baptism the verb is passive (we must “be baptized”). In baptism God publicly declares, “This child of these believing parents is a child of my covenant.” In response the parents promise to nurture that child in the Christian faith. The Church promises to do the same. As the child grows within the embrace of family and church, the day comes when he will publicly give his affirmation to the question, “Do you openly accept God’s covenant promise, which has been signified and sealed to you in your baptism, and do you humbly confess that you are sinful and that you seek life not in yourself but only in Jesus Christ your Savior?”

Of course, the infant child at the font of baptism does not understand all of that, but surely God has the freedom to speak his word of grace and make his promises to whom he chooses. Loving parents will tell the infant of their love for her and their hopes for her future. What is to prevent God from doing the same in baptism?

Baptism does not save the child, nor does it guarantee that the child will grow up in the Christian faith. It is possible for covenant youth to reject or ignore what God said to them in their baptism. But that does not undo God’s action. The cord of divine love has been attached in baptism. God is faithful. Prodigal sons and daughters may wander into far countries of unbelief, but the church continues to pray that some day that cord of love, signified and sealed in baptism, will draw them back home.

It is not enough to christen the child in a public “name the baby” event. It is not enough to dedicate the child in a public church ceremony. It is not enough to postpone baptism until the child is able to understand. The children whom God has brought into his covenant through their birth to believing parents deserve nothing less than the Christ-ordained sacrament of baptism.
Infant Baptism in Our Reformed Confessions

Baptist Christians and Reformed Christians affirm many of the same doctrines, but one issue they disagree on is whether the infants of Christian parents should be baptized. Most of us in the Reformed tradition say yes; our Baptist brothers and sisters say no.

This debate goes back almost five hundred years to the beginnings of the Reformed tradition in Switzerland during the Protestant Reformation. In the 1520s, Ulrich Zwingli, the father of Reformed Protestantism, became involved in a controversy over baptism with some of his own followers, who later broke away and formed separate religious communities. These groups came to be called Anabaptists (“rebaptizers”) because they insisted that all who had been baptized as babies needed to be baptized again when they were old enough to profess their faith in Christ (believer’s baptism).

The treatment of infant baptism in two of the Christian Reformed Church’s confessions, the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), can only be understood against the background of this Anabaptist challenge. The Belgic Confession (BC) begins its discussion of infant baptism with the strong affirmation that “we detest the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with a single baptism once received and also condemn the baptism of the children of believers” (Art. 34). The Heidelberg Catechism (HC) asks the question “Should infants, too, be baptized?” (Q 74) largely because of the Anabaptist claim that only believers should be baptized. In what follows, then, we shall look at three areas of disagreement between the Anabaptists and the Reformed that are reflected in our confessional statements on infant baptism.

The Nature of a Sacrament

First, the Anabaptists and Reformed differed on what exactly a sacrament is. It primarily an activity in which we are saying something to God or God is saying something to us? The Anabaptists held to the first position. In their view, when a person turns to God in repentance and faith, baptism should be the occasion for giving public expression to that commitment. In baptism that person makes promises to God and to the Christian community that he or she is now joining. Baptism serves as a kind of ceremonial “profession of faith.”

The Reformed confessions, however, see this quite differently. Sacraments are an arena in which God is the primary actor and speaker. They are God’s visible word to the church. God instituted the sacraments to signify and seal to the covenant community his promises of forgiveness and new life (HC, Q&A 66; BC, Art. 33).

Of course, in the baptism of infants, the parents and congregation also promise to instruct and encourage their children in the faith, and these children must someday respond to the promises God made in their baptism. But whenever our confessions talk about baptismal promises, they are always God’s promises to us (BC, Art. 34; HC, Q&A 69, 71, 74). A baby’s lack of faith, therefore, is not an obstacle to baptism, as the Anabaptists claimed. God is doing the promising there, not the child. Indeed, the baptism of an infant beautifully illustrates the promise of salvation sola gratia (“by grace alone”) that lies at the heart of the sacrament: at the font God reaches out to weak and helpless sinners who cannot reach out to him.

The Nature of Scripture

Second, the Anabaptist and Reformed positions on infant baptism were rooted in fundamentally different approaches to the interpretation of Scripture, especially when it came to the relationship between the Testaments. The Anabaptists saw a basic discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. The church’s primary authority after the time of Christ was the apostolic teaching of the New Testament. The Old Testament remained normative only so far as its teachings and practices were confirmed in the New. Therefore, since there is clear testimony in the New Testament to believer baptism and none to the baptism of infants, it is obvious what the practice of the Christian church should be.

The Reformed confessions, however, took a much different approach to the relationship between the Testaments. Whereas the Anabaptists saw a basic discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments, the confessions recognized an underlying unity between them. In this view, Old Testament teachings and practices continue to be valid unless they are replaced or fulfilled in the New Testament.

This unity of Scripture is alluded to in the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism even before they deal with baptism. The one church of Christ, for example, is not just a New Testament phenomenon, but “has existed from the beginning of the world and will last to the end . . .” (BC, Art. 27). The gospel, too, is not just good news on the lips of Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament. God

The baptism of an infant beautifully illustrates the promise of salvation sola gratia (“by grace alone”).
revealed it already in Paradise after the fall, proclaimed it by the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, and even “portrayed it by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law” (HC, Q&A 19).

One of the clearest testimonies to the unity of the testaments, however, is the everlasting covenant established by God with Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 17. Right from the start, children of believing parents were “in God’s covenant” and were “his people,” and that has never changed. As such, “they, no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin … and the Holy Spirit who produces faith” (HC, Q&A 74). And since circumcision and baptism both point to these covenant promises, “our children ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as little children were circumcised in Israel on the basis of the same promises made to our children” (BC, Art. 34).

The implication here is that one cannot reject infant baptism on the basis of the silence of the New Testament. The Old Testament is unmistakable in its command to apply the sign of the covenant to infants, and that command was never revoked. From this perspective, therefore, it is not the responsibility of the Reformed to show where in the New Testament infant baptism is commanded; it is the responsibility of the Anabaptists to show where in the New Testament the covenant structures established in the Old Testament were overturned.

The Nature of the Church

A third area of disagreement had to do with the status of children in the visible church. According to the Belgic Confession, all who are baptized are “received into God’s church and set apart from all other people and alien religions” (Art. 34). The Heidelberg Catechism declares that “by baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers” (Q&A 74).

At first glance, this language of being set apart from other people and religions and distinguished from the children of unbelievers may sound elitist and arrogant. But when viewed against the background of the Anabaptist challenge to infant baptism, the reason for such language becomes clearer. It reflects a concern about the Anabaptist doctrine of the church. The Anabaptists maintained that the church is a voluntary association of believers, and membership in the church is restricted to those who have professed their faith and been baptized.

But that raised the question of the status of the little children of these believers. Does Anabaptist teaching imply that they are not members of the church? If so, are they then to be treated as unbelievers? Or do they belong to some other category?

These are the troubling questions that the confessional language of setting apart and distinction was intending to address. This language reflects a conviction that nowhere in Scripture, Old or New Testament, are covenant children considered as anything other than full members of the visible church. They are not the same as children of unbelievers or those outside of the visible church. Rather, by their baptism they are formally “received into God’s church.” They, like their parents, are identified as part of that special community in which God has promised to work graciously and to extend the blessings of salvation through the generations.

Importance

How serious are the differences between these two perspectives on baptism? For the Christian Reformed Church, this is not just a theoretical question. In 2007 our synod was presented with an overture “to study the growing practice of infant dedication” (and believer baptism) in the CRC. Synod responded by discouraging the practice of infant dedication, reaffirming the church’s commitment to infant baptism, and asking the Faith Formation Committee to provide pastoral guidance to congregations with members who are requesting infant dedication (Acts of Synod 2007, p. 659). (This committee was formed in 2007 to guide the CRC for five years regarding the issue of children and the Lord’s Supper.)

As we continue to wrestle with these differences, we should be careful, first of all, not to exaggerate their importance. As unlike as the two positions are, they do not touch the core of the Christian faith. Infant baptism is not what we call “a salvation issue”—one that endangers or determines a person’s salvation. It is most regrettable, therefore, that some of our ancestors in Reformation Europe considered Anabaptists a false church, and even drowned some of them in a cruel mockery of their insistence on being baptized again.

But if we should not exaggerate these differences, our confessions remind us that we should not minimize them either. At issue here is not just a minor variation in liturgical practice, but two approaches to baptism rooted in fundamentally different views of sacraments, the relation between the testaments, and the nature of the church. These differences in doctrine and practice have implications for how we view our children, how we approach their faith formation, and how we organize our congregational life together. Infant baptism may not be a core Christian teaching, but it has played a major role in shaping confessional Reformed Christianity for half a millennium.
Interview with 2004 CTS Graduate David Gifford on the Challenges of Baptism in a Missionary Setting

**Forum:** Since graduating from CTS you’ve been ordained and are now serving as a Christian Reformed missionary in Mexico. What tensions have you encountered there related to the sacrament of baptism?

**Gifford:** We work in a context where the dominant Roman Catholic Church has traditionally focused more on superstitious beliefs and practices and devotion to Mary than on faithfulness to the biblical message of salvation in Christ. So when people discover the gospel and become Christians, there is a dramatic move from darkness to light. New converts are surprised to discover what the Bible really teaches about doctrine and conduct. Naturally, their first instinct is to want to publicly celebrate their conversion process by being baptized. As a response, the Mexican Presbyterian denominations we partner with have adopted the practice of rebaptizing new converts from Catholicism.

The tension for me is that our Reformed confessions (which were written in the very similar context of a Roman Catholic-dominated sixteenth-century Europe) require infant baptism and prohibit the rebaptism of people who have been baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As an ordained CRC minister, I am expected to uphold and defend these confessions, but as a missionary I am expected to “do in Rome as the Romans do” and fit in with local church practices here in Mexico.

**How are you dealing with those tensions?**

On the one hand, I have decided to refrain altogether from performing baptisms and professions of faith here. I believe that my commitment to our Reformed confessions sets limits on what I can and cannot do as I work with other denominations as an ordained CRC minister and missionary. Anyway, there are local leaders who can and should be doing these things. My role is to come alongside Mexican pastors as a resource person rather than do their job for them.

On the other hand, I don’t feel it’s my place to pressure another church body to change their established practices. If asked, I will explain how we do baptism in our denomination and why, but it would be inappropriate for me as a guest of our partner denomination to start a campaign to rewrite their church constitution!

The members of our Mexico team have diverse opinions about how to manage this tension, and some missionaries face pressures that I do not. For example, some of our missionaries function as pastors in Mexican churches and are expected to perform all the functions of ministry, including baptism. And some feel that by sending us here to work with these churches, the CRC has given us permission to fit in with these churches’ practices. We have a great group of missionaries here, and no doubt we will continue to prayerfully discuss this issue for a long time to come.

**How did your own beliefs about baptism change when you were in seminary?**

I am a convert both to Christianity and to the Reformed version of it. I can identify with new converts in Mexico, because I, too, wished to be rebaptized as a new believer, and I was dissuaded from doing so by the consistory of the first church I attended (in the Reformed Church in America). For many years I believed infant dedication and believer’s baptism to be far more biblical than the Reformed view, but I kept my opinions to myself. This all began to change while I served as a church planter in Ecuador with SIM, an interdenominational mission. In various ways I was forced to confront the differences between the two views, and gradually found myself being persuaded by the Reformed view.

After Ecuador I went to Calvin Theological Seminary for more training. The ecclesiology and infant baptism courses I took at CTS were a Godsend to me. I still had nagging doubts about the Reformed view of baptism. If, as Reformed theology teaches, the sacraments are “seals” and are a “means of grace,” does that mean that baptism somehow magically confers saving grace on an infant without the need for faith? That went against my biblical and evangelical instincts.

But the readings I did and the guidance I received from Professors Biema and DeMooor helped me work through those issues, and I’ve written about that process at length on my blog (www.giffmex.org/blog). I am very grateful to CTS for helping me tie up important loose ends and become a wholehearted supporter of the Reformed view of baptism.

**What advice do you have for other ministers, missionaries, and church planters who want to be faithful to Reformed beliefs about baptism but serve in contexts that prefer believer’s baptism and infant dedication?**

It’s important to recognize that for many of those influenced by other evangelical churches, our view sounds like a sub-biblical, semi-mystical, commitment-free carryover from liberal European state churches. We will need to help such people to work through the doctrinal and practical issues they face as they learn what sounds to them like a foreign language.

My advice: Avoid the twin dangers of belligerence and embarrassment. We can be proud of what we believe without using it to be divisive or to vilify Christians of other persuasions. But also, we can be pastorally sensitive without needing to be ashamed of what our church teaches, as if it were less biblical than the other options out there. We shouldn’t be quick to jettison our distinctiveives for expediency’s sake or because a few people find them difficult or unappealing. In the end, we are the ones who need to show them why our beliefs are appealing. We will need to learn well what we believe, and proclaim it proudly and passionately in our preaching, teaching, and pastoral care.
The summer of 2008 marked a high point for the four-year-old Center for Excellence in Preaching (CEP) at Calvin Theological Seminary as it sponsored four seminars that offered rich opportunities for pastors to get away from the pressures of ministry and the ongoing task of writing new sermons in order to interact with peers and pick up a wealth of new ideas.

A seminar on “Imaginative Reading for Creative Preaching” has been held at CTS for several years, and was again led for two weeks this summer by President Neal Plantinga and Hulitt Gloor of Baylor University. New this year was an offering of this popular seminar by Plantinga and CEP Director Scott Hoezee at the YMCA of the Rockies at Snow Mountain Ranch in Colorado—a week-long seminar for 20 pastors that included time for recreation with their families. Each morning the group pondered a different form of writing or literature, and discussed how preaching can be enriched by it. The rest of the time was free time for the pastors to spend with their families, exploring the ranch as well as nearby Rocky Mountain National Park. Without exception, the participants and their families—a group of nearly 100 people in all—said that not only was the seminar itself a rich environment for learning, but the opportunity to take a true family vacation in that part of the world was an experience they will long cherish. One reflected, “My family has often been asked to help pay the price of ministry. This was an occasion to be blessed by being a pastor’s family.”

The third annual meeting of “The Preachers’ Oasis” included fourteen pastors who spent a week thinking about the preaching task generally as well as focusing very specifically on their own preaching. Co-led by CEP Director Scott Hoezee, CTS Professor of Preaching Mary Hulst, and Calvin College Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences Randy Bytwerk, the Oasis seminar featured individualized feedback for each participant regarding videotaped sermons they sent in advance. They considered what was particularly effective and how the pastor needed to focus his or her energies in order to become a better preacher. Participants appreciated the morning seminar sessions and also the downtime, the true “Oasis” part of the week.

“From Text to Sermon” was a new seminar this summer for eighteen pastors to learn from Frederick Dale Bruner, one of today’s best Bible teachers and commentators. The seminar showcased Dr. Bruner’s skill in helping spark in preachers the ideas about the biblical text that make for lively sermons. After the seminar, one pastor commented, “I return home from some preaching conferences feeling guilty that I don’t work harder or depressed that I’m not a better preacher. However, I returned from this conference reinvigorated by the Spirit, by Dale and Scott’s wonderful leadership, and by the inspiring fellowship with other attendees. It was so good simply to be taught and challenged by wonderful biblical scholars who are genuine servants.”

For more complete reports of the 2008 seminars go to http://cep.calvinseminary.edu. Also, watch the website for dates and applications for summer 2009 seminars. All three on-campus seminars will be offered again, with another Snow Mountain Ranch seminar coming in June 2010.
Wherever God is calling you, we can help you get there.