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Remembering Our Baptisms

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Remembering our Baptisms (C25)
Howard Vanderwell
Calvin Symposium on Worship 2011
Friday and Saturday – Hiemenga Hall 332

1. The four function of Baptism:
 - Giver of **grace**
 - Giver of **status**.
 - Giver of **Identity**
 - Giver of **Calling**

Thesis #1 – one of the liabilities of infant baptism is that it becomes too easy to commit the unintentional sin of forgetting.

Thesis #2 - communities that regularly engage in the affirmation/remembering of baptism tend to more healthily facilitate faith formation.

Thesis #3 – effective remembering of our baptisms requires three-fold collaborative efforts of - the church in worship, the church in education, and the parents in the home.

Some Guidelines for Remembering:

1. Liturgical visibility:

2. Regular Education:

3. Parental Partnership:

The Sharing of Best Practices

In Homes.....

In Church

Affirming Baptism and Forming Faith

Faith Formation Committee of CRCNA

PART 1: BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

1.1 Baptism and the Grace of God

The marvelous grace of God given through Jesus Christ and conveyed to us through the work of the Holy Spirit is the foundation of baptism. Through this sacrament, God takes the initiative and declares that we belong to him. It is God who acts through baptism, working to nourish, sustain, comfort, challenge, teach, and assure us. A richly symbolic action, the celebration of baptism stirs our imaginations to perceive the work of God and the contours of the gospel more clearly. “By Baptism we are received into God’s church and set apart from all other people . . . that we may be dedicated entirely to him, bearing his mark and sign. It also witnesses to us that he will be our God forever, since he is our gracious Father” (*Belgic Confession*, art. 33).

We call on each other to celebrate the wondrous grace of God signified in baptism in all the liturgical and pedagogical avenues available to us.

1.2 Multiple Scriptural Images for Baptism

As the New Testament unfolds the meaning of baptism, it teaches us that baptism is a single celebration that conveys several layers of meaning. It is at once a sign of the washing away of sin (Acts 2:28, Acts 22:16), a sign of our union with Jesus’ death and resurrection (Romans 6:4, Colossians 2:12), a sign of the promise of new birth in Christ (1 Peter 3:21-22), a sign of incorporation into the one, universal church (Ephesians 4: 5, 1 Corinthians 1:13, 12:13), and a sign of the covenant and kingdom of God (Ephesians 1:13, Colossians 2:11). While the image of washing away sin has long been primary in Reformed theology and liturgy, the celebration of baptism should highlight each of these aspects of New Testament teaching.

While we gratefully recognize the rich blessings of the washing imagery in baptism; we also call on each other to affirm and teach the full range of scriptural imagery for baptism.

1.3 Baptism and the Drama of Redemption

When God called Abram to leave his country, his people and his father’s household God gave him a new identity, promised to make his name great and cause him to be a blessing to all the peoples on earth. (Genesis 12:1-3) Later God identified his arrangement with Abram as a covenant to which God would be faithful forever, which

would involve both Abraham and his descendants for the generations to come, and should be signified by circumcision. (Genesis 17:1-14).

In the New Testament baptism functions similarly, as a sign of God's covenant to which he will always be faithful, involving us and our descendants as his covenant children, and signified by the water of baptism. Paul says that in our baptism we have a "circumcision not performed by human hands" and that we are "circumcised by Christ". (Colossians 2:11,12)

In baptism God identifies us as his covenant children, pledges his faithfulness to us, and calls us to faithful obedience as his body in the world.

We call on each other to see the entire story of God's redemptive work expressed in our baptism, and to proclaim that his gift of a new identity is at the heart of his drama of redemption.

1.4 Baptism as a sign of both forgiveness and life-long dying and rising with Christ

One way to summarize this rich scriptural teaching is to note how baptism is a sign of both the believer's justification and sanctification. It is a sign of both the washing and cleansing of our sin and also of our being "set apart . . . that we may be dedicated entirely to God" (*Belgic Confession* 24). John Calvin referred to this as a "double grace and benefit from God in baptism," which includes both that "God wills to be a merciful Father to us, not imputing to us all our faults" and that "God will assist us by his Holy Spirit so that we will have the power to battle against the devil, sin, and the desires of the flesh, until we have victory in this, and to live in the liberty of his kingdom" (*Calvin's 1542 baptismal liturgy*). The Apostle Paul uses the metaphor of clothing to describe these two dimensions of the sacrament. Paul declares that "you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:26f.). But this status of being clothed with Christ includes the call to continue putting on the character of Christ: "as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Colossians 3:12). The unfathomable gift of a new status implicitly comes with a call sustained by a promise, for "he who began a good work in (us) will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). In this context, we take note of the tendency in some preaching and teaching about baptism to focus only on justification—a narrowing which can undermine our perception of God's grace throughout life and our lifelong practice of affirming baptismal identity (see section 2).

We call on each other to proclaim both the gift and the calling that comes to us in our baptism.

1.5 Baptismal Identity

In all these ways, baptism points us to our ultimate identity in Christ. This identity should shape our habits, our piety, and our daily life. The Christian life is a daily dying to sin and rising with Christ. As the Belgic Confession concludes, “this baptism is profitable not only when the water is on us and when we receive it but throughout our entire lives” (*Belgic Confession*, art. 34). This statement echoes John Calvin’s concern that “The benefit which we derive from the sacraments ought by no means to be restricted to the time when they are administered to us, as though the visible sign conveyed with itself the grace of God only at that moment when it is actually being proffered . . . the benefit of baptism lies open to the whole course of life, because the promise which is contained in it is perpetually in force” (*1549 Articles concerning the sacraments*). This benefit blesses both infants and adults, and infants gradually grow to appropriate this benefit as they mature. Our baptismal identity in Christ reminds us of the astonishing work of the Holy Spirit to transform and renew our entire being—our dispositions, desires, knowledge, imagination, emotions, and more—in the image of Christ (Colossians 3:10, II Corinthians 3:18; 4:15).

Baptism thus offers us our ultimate vocation, that of being disciples of Jesus, a vocation that includes, but is always more important than our careers, our hobbies, even our families. This comprehensive character is described by Paul at the conclusion of one of his key descriptions of living out this baptismal identity: “And whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17).

We call on each other to speak explicitly with people of all ages reminding them that their identity is found in God’s claim on them, a claim made visible in baptism.

1.6 The Inclusion of Infants

The inclusion of the children of believers in the covenant of grace is engrained in God’s plan of redemption. Covenant infants have a relationship with God (cf. Psalms 22:9-10; 71:6; 139:13; Jeremiah 1:5) and, therefore, covenant blessings are promised to them (Genesis 17:7; Acts 2:39). If crossing the Red Sea pictures baptism, it would be impossible to imagine Israel leaving the children on shore until they were old enough to cross on their own (I Corinthians 10:2). Jesus embraced infants as citizens of his Kingdom (Luke 18:16) further suggesting how children need not be excluded from baptism. Paul refers to baptism as receiving the circumcision done by Christ (Colossians 2:11-12). For these reasons, Reformed Christians, joining with many major Christian traditions, have concluded that there is no biblical warrant for withholding baptism from covenant children. As the Belgic Confession concludes, “Truly, Christ has shed his blood no less for washing the little children of believers than he did for adults” (art. 34).

We also take note that some other Christian traditions refrain from baptizing infants, at times in conjunction with constructive criticisms of those who do. We are particularly

grateful for their warnings to us about allowing the practice of infant baptism to erode our commitment to teach our children the faith and to challenge them to express their faith in Christ. Indeed, infant baptism should heighten, not erode our commitment to invite our children and youth to claim their baptismal identity.

We call on each other to celebrate that infants of believers are covenant children who are warmly invited to taste God's grace through the sacrament of baptism and to regularly invite children and youth to consider the claim of God on their life and to express their faith.

1.7 Baptism as Ritual Action

There are many reasons to be cautious about ritual action. The Bible gives priority to hearing the Word as the means of grace (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4; Luke 10:16; Romans 10:14-17), forbids the use of images bearing the wrong message (Exodus 20:4; *Heidelberg Catechism* Q/A 98), declares the Old Testament ceremonies as fulfilled in Christ (Colossians 2:17), and defines faith as the conviction of things not seen (John 20:29; Hebrews 11:1; II Corinthians 5:7).

There are also many reasons to value healthy ritual actions, including the redemptive intentions of the Creator for both ear and eye (Proverbs 20:12), Jesus' explicit command to baptize (Matthew 28:19), and Jesus' participation in ritual practices (Luke 22:14-23, John 13:1-11), including his own baptism (Matthew 3:13-17). Such concrete, physical, symbolic action is designed, says the Belgic Confession, to "represent better to our external senses both what God enables us to understand by his Word and what he does inwardly in our hearts". This embodied nature of baptism is significant for congregations in many ways. It is a source of encouragement not only when we receive baptism, but also when we witness it. It demonstrates that grace comes to us as fully embodied creatures, created in God's image.

We call on each other to recognize the ritual and sensory character of baptism in ways that deepen the congregation's participation, while resisting any semblance of ritualism or formalism.

1.8 The Covenant Community in Baptism

Baptism is not intended to be a private action, but one which takes place within the worshiping community. God speaks publicly about the covenant position of the one being baptized. The recipients of baptism are publicly welcomed as members of the covenant community. And the community responds with its vows to receive baptized persons in love, to pray for them, and to encourage and sustain them in the fellowship of believers (cf. Form for Baptism of Children and Baptism of Adults). The covenant community lives out its vows by loving, praying for, encouraging, teaching, mentoring, and offering models of grace-filled, faithful living to every member of the congregation.

We call on each other to take such vows seriously and faithfully provide the support, encouragement and ministries needed to foster healthy growth of faith in all who are baptized.

1.9 The Significance of Baptismal Identity in Contemporary Culture

Claiming baptismal identity is especially important in the context of contemporary culture which is hungering for healing, hope, and significant relationships. Baptism clearly anchors our spirituality in the church, and resists any church-less form of spirituality. Baptism frankly acknowledges that the Christian life may involve suffering for Christ, resisting any form of spirituality that is sentimental or therapeutic. Baptism grounds us in the grace of God, resisting any spirituality that is moralistic. Baptism calls attention to the beauty, glory, holiness, and gracious sovereignty of a triune God who is intimately involved in creation and in the life of the church, resisting any notion of God as removed or isolated. Baptism draws us into the world-wide redemptive work of God who is making all things new through the work of his Son Jesus Christ.

We call on each other to discern and resist the spirits of the age that seek to undermine the meaning or significance of baptism, and to take steps to affirm its deepest meaning and significance.

PART 2: AFFIRMING BAPTISMAL IDENTITY AS A LIFELONG PRACTICE

2.1 Remembering and Affirming Baptism Throughout Life

While baptism is rightly celebrated only once, affirming our baptismal identity is a life-long practice. The Belgic Confession reminds us, "...this baptism is profitable not only when the water is on us and when we receive it but throughout our entire lives" (Art.34). John Calvin likewise affirmed: "we must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life. Therefore, as often as we fall away (i.e., newly committed sins into which we fall after baptism), we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins" (*Institutes* 4.15.3).

We call on each other to remember and affirm our baptismal identity throughout our lives. We call on parents to regularly remind children of their baptism and its significance.

2.2 Nurturing Baptismal Identity in Congregations

Our baptismal identity in Christ is nurtured through a variety of scripturally-mandated practices and disciplines of prayer, learning, obedience, witness, fellowship, and service. For this reason, congregations teach people of all ages, including very young children, to pray, to understand the Bible, and to engage in service in both the church and society.

Our church education, fellowship, and service programs are part of how we live out our baptismal vows. Speaking explicitly about the connection between these aspects of church life and baptism is constructive—and it may be a bit too rare in some contexts. When the connection is clear, then we more easily understand that our learning, fellowship, and service in congregational life are not merely activities of self-enrichment. They are expressions of our identity in Christ. They are ways for each of us to embrace and live out of this identity.

We call on each other to speak more intentionally about the connection between baptismal identity and congregational programs for education, service, and mission.

2.3 Milestones: Multiple Occasions for Publicly Affirming Baptism

Public celebrations of milestone moments promise to reinforce baptismal identity, convey the church's love for each individual, and express a warm invitation to deeper participation in the life of faith (the milestone imagery is suggested, for example, in Joshua 4: 21-24). There are particular occasions when our focus on baptismal identity is especially important.

1. Public profession of faith is an especially important occasion for looking back at God's hand on us, affirming his grace for us, and looking ahead to continued obedience (see also Section 3 below).
2. In corporate worship, we regularly affirm our faith in receiving the assurance of pardon, in regular professions of the creeds, in the baptism of others, at the Lord's Table, and at other key milestones in congregational life. Nearly every worship service offers us opportunities to affirm our baptismal identity.
3. Further, we affirm baptismal identity in significant public moments in the lives of individual Christians, including marriage, ordination, commissioning services for particular ministries, being welcomed into a new congregation, or reaffirmation of faith after a time of estrangement from the church, even at the time of death. At times, the language of baptism may be too obscure in our celebrations of these events. Renewing awareness of how each of these moments is a part of living our baptismal vocation offers rich possibilities for renewed faithfulness.
4. This perspective also provides a framework for marking significant life moments of many kinds: for example, pregnancy, miscarriage, significant birthdays and anniversaries, graduations, new employment or unemployment, retirement, hospitalization, recognition of an addiction or recovery from an addiction, significant moves, and more. In each of these significant times of transition, individuals, families, fellowship groups, and congregations can joyfully affirm "we claim our identity as children of God" and pray "Spirit of God, help us live out our identity in this new circumstance."

5. Other times of affirmation can occur at special moments in the life of a congregation, including celebrations of significant anniversaries or dedications of new ministries or facilities, marking times of crisis or difficult decisions, opportunities to welcome or say farewell to a pastor.

All such occasions, and many others, are fitting times for individuals or congregations to intentionally and explicitly remember baptism, claim again the promises of God in Christ, and renew commitment to baptismal living. Speaking explicitly about baptism in all these events is an important antidote to any sense that baptism is an isolated ritual, disconnected from the Christian life.

We call on each other to regularly celebrate our public affirmations of baptism at multiple occasions to sense the journey of our lives and the faithfulness of God's grace, and our oneness with each other.

We call on churches to do further work in providing very practical resources for worship and congregational life and to eagerly share these with other congregations.

2.4 Affirming Baptism in Many Cultural Contexts

We celebrate the many ways that the formation of children and youth comes to expression in the many varied cultures represented in God's growing family, in and beyond the CRC. Through the varied cultural expressions within the CRC, we see the fabric of God's redeeming work in breaking down dividing walls and creating one new people. (See Ephesians 2:14ff.) We acknowledge that "the church, in its unity and diversity, is God's strategic vehicle for bringing into being his new creation." (1996 *Acts of Synod*, p. 230) While we recognize that race, ethnicity, and culture are significant for self-identification, we uphold that "Christians find their deepest identity in union with and in the service of Christ" (1996 *Acts of Synod*, p. 232). We are grateful for the variety of approaches to nurturing faith and teaching scriptural truths that arise out of diverse cultural contexts. We are grateful for the ways that various cultures express, for instance, passion for prayer, cultivate faith through family and other inter-generational relationships, tell stories that affirm God's grace, and mark significant occasions in the growth and development of each child and young person.

We encourage each other to learn from and about faith formation practices in many times and places.

We challenge each other to develop and refine faith formation practices that embody the fullness of the gospel in ways that are at once deeply contextual and counter-cultural.

2.5 Remembering and Affirming Baptism in Family Life

Since parents and guardians have such a significant role in nurturing their children's faith, they should make every effort to regularly teach their children about the meaning of baptism. Parents and guardians can use the occasion of a baptism in the family or in the church family to teach their children about the promises and mystery of the sacrament of baptism. Remembering and celebrating a child's "baptism birthday" can be a particularly significant time for learning and growth in family life. Parents and guardians need to frequently speak to their children about baptism, and model the importance of baptismal identity in their own lives. They can find support and encouragement in the fact that they do not carry such tasks alone, but are supported by the entire congregation.

We call on parents and guardians to teach their children about their baptism, to make possible their participation in the life of the church, and to nurture their sense of baptismal identity.

2.6 Affirmation of Baptism instead of Rebaptism

The experience of spiritual renewal and repentance are remarkable gifts of God to individuals and to the church. Requests for rebaptism that come from individuals are thus occasions for gratitude and joy for the work of God in their life. The church's response to these requests should reflect this gratitude.

The response should also be aware of the complex messages that rebaptism can convey, including the strong resistance to rebaptism articulated in the Reformed Confessions. The Belgic Confession concludes, "we believe that anyone who aspires to reach eternal life ought to be baptized only once without ever repeating it—for we cannot be born twice." (Art. 34) More specifically, re-baptizing can easily convey three false impressions:

- (1) that God's promises were not really given in one's original baptism,
- (2) that the congregation or denomination in which a given member was originally baptized is not a legitimate part of Christ's body, and
- (3) that personal experience is the sole barometer of the presence of God.

For these reasons, Reformed churches in many cultural contexts have responded to requests for rebaptism by planning for public celebrations of *affirmation* of baptism. These celebrations offer praise and thanks for the sovereign grace of God, providing a memorable, visible, and public milestone for both the congregation and the individual.

We call on each other to strengthen joyful practices of affirming baptism_and reaffirming baptismal_vows, rather than rebaptism, as the appropriate pastoral response to requests for rebaptism.

2.7 Affirming Baptism in Contemporary Cultures

Affirming baptism is a particularly significant act in many contemporary cultural contexts. In an age in which people long for a sense of belonging, affirming baptism rehearses that we belong to Christ and to the body of Christ, the church. In a culture of consumerism, baptism affirms that we know to whom we belong and the radical transformation of our values. In an age of individualism, baptism affirms our inclusion as members of Christ's body. In an age which tends to evaluate people on their achievements, baptism affirms that our identity as children of God is a gift that does not depend on our own efforts. In a world that belongs to God, baptism affirms our calling to identify movements of providence within history and culture that can serve to extend Christ's rule and reign. In a world of self-promotion, affirming our baptism calls us to a life of self-giving mission that seeks first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33), that finds our greatness in our service (Mark 10:43-45), and unselfish service that seeks out the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40).

We call on Christians and churches everywhere to refuse to allow the world to force us into its mold and to regularly affirm that our baptism calls us to remain true to our mission for God in this world (Romans 12:1-2).