

WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH XXVIII: 5-7

(Readings: Exod.4:18-31; Tit.3:3-11)

What Keeps Baptism In Its Proper Place

Having established from Scripture why baptism is the initiatory sacrament and all that is tied up with that, we go on now to deal with the errors which have come along with this sacrament. Because that's the way Satan operates. Once something has become clearly part of the way Christ has outlined for His Church the devil moves on to distort the established pattern.

He would never directly go against something - that would give the game away. Instead he uses what the Lord has laid down to specifically point to Him in a way that draws people away from Him. Before you know it, it's back to what man does all over again! And there the misuses become the abuses.

How bad can that get? Well, here's one story about the baptism of a bell! It was in Naples, southern Italy, that this ceremony took place. A noble lord was god-father of the bell, and a lady from the aristocracy was the god-mother. Most of the prayers said on this occasion ended with these words: 'That Thou wouldst be pleased to rinse, purify, sanctify, and consecrate these bells with Thy heavenly blessing.' And the words of consecration were these: 'Let the sign be consecrated and sanctified, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' The bishop then turning to the people, said, 'The bell's name is Mary.' The name the god-parents had chosen.

That's terrible, isn't it? They've totally twisted it. In fact, they have blasphemed to use God's Name like this. It's become nothing else than sheer superstition.

Baptism Must Simply Be A Sign

That's why the first aspect to our considering the Article 5 till 7 of Chapter 28 on 'Baptism' is that BAPTISM MUST SIMPLY BE A SIGN. So while Rome teaches the necessity of baptism as a way of regenerating grace, a way of saving us, the Reformed teach the necessity of baptism as God's direction to us. Remember, that's what a sign does. It points us to something.

We can take the incident with Moses in Exodus 4 as one example of this. While this story tells us how very seriously God views his sacrament it wasn't Moses' son who was being punished for not receiving the sign. It was Moses himself because he had neglected the ordinance for his child. He had failed to point to the covenant God.

You see, baptism is a moral duty. So any person who could be baptised, or who could present his children for baptism, but doesn't, is in a very different position from the person who would be baptised but couldn't.

This is further shown in Luke 7 with the Pharisees and the experts in the law. Verse 30 there says that they "rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptised by John."

On the other hand, you have such a situation as the thief on the cross. Luke 23 verse 42 tells us about his conversion on the cross. He obviously couldn't have been baptised, but he was definitely saved!

It is God's command but it doesn't save us. Christ appointed it so to not do it is sin, but it's not the unforgivable sin.

As we saw in Articles 1 to 4, the Lord instituted it to parallel our salvation. In a visual way it shows physically on the outside what's happening spiritually on inside. This is why Article 7 definitively states it is only to be administered once. When Titus 3 verse 5 speaks of being saved

through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit it's only going to happen the one time. The covenant of grace stands on the faithfulness of God.

This doesn't mean that a baptised person cannot be unfaithful to the covenant. We do sin and go against God's will. But when you are sincerely sorry and you want to be restored, it's the self-same grace first sealed upon you in baptism which doesn't need to be repeated. I mean, God hasn't changed! You have! **BAPTISM MUST SIMPLY BE A SIGN.**

Even in situations where the one baptised turns against God, it is still a sign. Then it's a sign against them. This is shown in the case of Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8. In verse 13 there it is said that he believed and was baptised. Yet in verse 23 the apostle Peter sees that he was "full of bitterness and captive to sin." Here was a man who received properly administered baptism while in a state of sin. So baptism can be received when the grace it signifies isn't there.

The example of Esau also shows this. He was circumcised by divine command. Yet, as Romans 9 verse 13 says, it was revealed before he was born that he would never have union with Christ. No one can argue that somehow Esau wasn't properly circumcised. Nor can you say that it was presumed he was joined with Christ. He was circumcised because God commanded believers to give the sign and seal of the covenant to their children. The Bible doesn't teach that the proper administration of the sacrament of baptism requires that those who receive it actually have union with Christ. **BAPTISM MUST SIMPLY BE A SIGN.**

Paul showed the difference between baptism and regeneration in his first letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 1 verse 14 he writes, "I am thankful that I did not baptise any of you except Crispus and Gaius." For if baptism was regeneration his meaning would be, "I thank God I didn't regenerate any of you."

Now, would you thank God for that? Of course not! **BAPTISM MUST SIMPLY BE A SIGN.**

Baptism Must Always Be A Sign

All of this brings us to another aspect this afternoon. For not only is it that **BAPTISM MUST SIMPLY BE A SIGN**, in the second place, **BAPTISM MUST ALWAYS BE A SIGN.**

Well, what could I mean by this? Think of the nature of a sign. We have seen that it is what points us to something else. In this case, it points to God's covenant between Him and believers and their seed through the doing, dying and rising of Jesus Christ. That's why parents should often teach their children about their baptism. That's why adults themselves should think often about what it means.

You see, each time you look at this sign you are reminded of what God did in His Son. In fact, whenever you look at it believingly you grow your faith. Robert Shaw wrote in 1845, "we ought to improve our baptism, especially when we are present at the administration of it to others. Then he quotes the Larger Westminster Catechism, Answer 167, as to how we do this. Listen to the points it raises: Because it's "by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein. And, it's "by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements." And, it's "by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament". Further, it's "by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptised, for the mortifying of sin and the quickening of grace." And, it's "by endeavouring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ, and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptised by the same Spirit into one body."

Quiet some description! Baptism is an incredible picture. Indeed, it's a mirror reflecting back what we ought to be in Christ. A reflection we ought to see more and more in our lives.

This is what Jacob showed. He received the sacrament of circumcision at 8 days old. But it wasn't until later, with his conversion, that the efficacy of the sacrament was shown. That was when he met the Lord. In Genesis 32, the verses 24 till 28, he wrestled with God. Because of the faith shown there, he is then called 'Israel'. That name means "he struggles with God."

Those who argue against infant baptism often point out that there seems to be no evidence of the work of God's grace in those who are baptised as infants. They say, and it's quite true, that baptism has no saving effect on those infants when they're baptised. But that's misleading. It's not the whole picture - in fact, it misses the big picture altogether!

You see, it's not the purpose of baptism to bring us into union with Christ. Regeneration does that. Rather, baptism confirms and testifies to that union. So you certainly can't tie it down to a particular moment. You can't bind God. Although how many people don't try to do that?

In Dutch Reformed Church circles there was for a long time the strong belief that a child should be baptised within 8 days of the birth. So, with Mum still in bed having just had the baby a day or two ago, Dad is in church having the child baptised.

While this may have been originally because of the desire to be obedient to God's commands, it soon became a superstition in itself. If someone missed baptising the child that first Sunday after the birth, there was more than an elder's visit!

Now there may be the other extreme. People are waiting weeks, even months, for family to be able to come to the "special" day. In some churches they wait until the baby can smile for the cameras!

The words of John Calvin's motto are very appropriate here. He summed up his faith in these words: "I present my heart to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely." BAPTISM MUST ALWAYS BE A SIGN. Sooner or later, baptism will achieve its purpose in those God intends for salvation. It will testify and confirm that union the believer has with Christ.

That's a great comfort for those parents faithfully bringing up their children. But it's also a comfort for those who weren't brought up by believing parents. Because while the connection may have been a nominal one, isn't it God Himself who has brought about what baptism truly signifies? Don't you see now what it means?

The story is told of a parent who one evening entered the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne's house, and asked him to come with him to baptise a dying child. M'Cheyne knew that neither this man nor his wife ever entered the door of a church. But he got up and went with him. There a baby lay, apparently dying, and many of the female neighbours, also non-church members, standing around.

M'Cheyne came forward to where the child was, and spoke to the parents of their ungodly state and their terrible guilt before God. He concluded by showing them that, in such circumstances, he would consider it sinful to administer baptism to their infant.

They said, "You might at least do it for the sake of the poor child." He told them that it was not baptism that saved a soul, and that out of true concern for them, he must not do as they wished. The friends around the bed then joined the parents in telling him off for having no pity on the poor baby's soul!

But M'Cheyne wasn't moved. He told them that it was they who had been cruel to the child. Then, with a solemn warning, he left the house with their abuses ringing in his ears.

Dear believer, you know that's not what you are. So why put that on yourself? Instead, let's realise that baptism is a sign - to those who see! Looking to your baptism points us to the One who really counts. It's His grace - the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ - and the love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, which then remains with us - always!