FOR YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN

by MURRAY, KLINE, & POYTHRESS

The Best Articles on Infant Baptism
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CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

JOHN MURRAY

IN THE course of the last three to four centuries it is questionable if any topic in Christian theology can claim as prolific a literary output as the subject of baptism. One reason for this lies at hand. It is the controversy occasioned by the anabaptist rejection of the catholic position and practice. It might seem presumptuous and superfluous to encumber the library of books and pamphlets on the subject of baptism with another study on this theme. But the writer has been constrained to feel that his venture is not a work of supererogation.

Within protestant circles there is at the present time a widespread loss of conviction regarding the propriety and preceptive necessity of infant baptism. Even when the practice still persists, oftentimes there is little more than sentiment and tradition behind it. Such a situation is deplorable. Traditional sentiment can never be pleaded as the proper ground for any element of the worship of the church of God. Divine institution is the only warrant. And when sentiment or custom takes the place of the recognition of divine prescription in any particular that concerns the elements of divine worship, a state of mind is revealed which is altogether alien to the nature of the church and of the worship which it offers to God.

Furthermore, among seriously minded evangelical Christians, whose background and tradition have not been by any means baptist, there is a prevalent doubt as to the Biblical warrant for infant baptism. In this state of mind they are readily susceptible to baptist influence both as respects the insistence upon immersion as the only valid mode and the rejection of infant baptism. The movement away from the established Churches and toward independency has given a great deal of momentum to the tendency to adopt baptistic tenets and practice without necessarily adopting a baptist denomination.
It is with the hope that this study may contribute towards the correction of such evils that it is being offered to the public. While the writer has particularly in view those who are on the margin of abandoning the position taken in this study and of embracing what is in practice, if not in theory, the baptist position, and while it is hoped that many such may be reclaimed to understand that immersion is not necessary to baptism and that infant baptism is the divine institution, yet it is also hoped that this humble attempt may also be instrumental in restraining even baptists to reconsider their position.

The writer knows only too well how persuasive the baptist argument respecting infant baptism can be made to appear and how conclusive it becomes to many earnest and sincere Christians. He knows also how difficult it is to persuade people, whose thinking has been moulded after the baptist pattern, that the argument for infant baptism is Scriptural. But the reason for this is that to think organically of the Scripture revelation is much more difficult than to think atomistically. The argument for infant baptism rests upon the recognition that God's redemptive action and revelation in this world are covenantal. In a word, redemptive action is covenant action and redemptive revelation is covenant revelation. Embedded in this covenantal action of God is the principle that the infant seed of believers are embraced with their parents in the covenant relation and provision. It is this method of God's administration of grace in the world that must be appreciated. It belongs to the New Testament as well as to the Old. It is its presence and significance that grounds infant baptism. And it is the perception of its significance that illumines for us the meaning of this ordinance.

There are certain viewpoints, or at least angles of thought, expressed and sometimes insisted upon which diverge from the judgment of some of the most respected of Reformed writers. In the footnotes I have discussed some of these divergences at greater length. But it did not appear to be in the best interests of the purpose in view to burden the argument proper by expanded discussion of several details. In reference to the argument for infant baptism, in particular, I have tried to emphasize those aspects of the question which
call for greater emphasis and to give the presentation of the evidence a certain direction which, in my judgment, is better calculated to meet certain baptist objections. It has been my purpose to concentrate on what is basic and central, in the hope that the force of the evidence may not be dissipated by what is liable to be the consequence of more diffuse discussion. If these pages which follow minister to the conviction that the positions taken are grounded upon Scripture and enhance appreciation of the grace of God which the institution of baptism evinces, the author will be highly rewarded.

I

The Import of Baptism

The ordinance of baptism with which we are concerned is the ordinance that was instituted by our Lord himself on the eve of his ascension when he gave to his disciples the commission, “Go ye therefore and disciple all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19, 20). Other baptismal rites had preceded this commission. There was the baptism of John the Baptist. But John’s baptism is not to be identified with the ordinance instituted by Christ on the eve of his ascension. The character of John’s baptism was analogous to

the character of his ministry. John prepared the way of the Lord and his ministry was preparatory, transitional, and introductive. So was his baptism. We may no more identify the baptism of John with the ordinance instituted by Christ than we may identify the ministry and mission of John with the ministry and mission of Christ. Hence we cannot derive from the nature of John’s baptism the precise import of the ordinance of Christian baptism.

There was also the baptism that accompanied the ministry of Jesus prior to his death and resurrection (John 3:22, 26; 4:1, 2). These are the only references to this baptismal rite, which was actually performed not by Jesus himself but by his disciples (John 4:2). What its significance was it is difficult to say. We should be justified in inferring that it stood in a closer relationship to the ordinance instituted just before the ascension than did the baptism of John. It apparently indicated rather markedly the acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah and, in that sense, the discipleship of Jesus rather than that of John, a discipleship which John himself recognised as the only proper result of his own ministry and a discipleship urgently enjoined by John when he said, “He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:29, 30). Yet we do not have warrant by which to identify this baptism during Jesus’ earthly ministry with the ordinance of Matthew 28:19, 20. The latter is baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. We have no warrant to suppose that the earlier rite took this form. It is quite reasonable to believe that there was a very close relation between these.

lowing the exaltation of Christ”. He also thinks, however, that “the baptism by the disciples of Jesus mentioned in John 4:1 ff. may best be understood as a continuation of John’s baptism”. Although the question as to whether the baptism by Jesus’ disciples aligns itself more closely with John’s baptism rather than with Christian baptism is not of great importance, I am disposed to think that the baptism by Jesus’ disciples points more in the direction of the significance of Christian baptism than does the baptism of John. The reason for this judgment is given in the next paragraph.
two rites both in the mind of Jesus himself and in the recognition of the disciples. Indeed, so close may have been the relation that baptism in the name of the triune God was the necessary development of the earlier rite. But we are compelled to recognise the distinctiveness of the rite enunciated and embodied in the great commission. It is from the terms of this institution and from subsequent references in the New Testament that we are to derive the precise import of this ordinance.

We are liable to be misled by the nature of the ordinance, as one of washing with water, into thinking that the basic import is that of purification. However important that element is and even though it is included in the import of baptism, it does not appear to be the most central or basic element. We must take our point of departure from the very formula which Jesus used in the institution, “baptising them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). It is this notion of “baptising into” that must be appreciated and analysed. This formula appears in other connections, as, for example, “baptised into Moses” (I Cor. 10:2) and “baptised into the name of Paul” (I Cor. 1:13). It is apparent that it expresses a relationship to the person into whom or into whose name persons may have been baptised. It is this fact of relationship that is basic. Hence we have to ask the question: what kind of relationship?

It is here that some of the most relevant references in the New Testament afford us light and direction. Such passages as Romans 6:3–6; I Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27,28; Colossians 2:11, 12 plainly indicate that union with Christ is the governing idea. Baptism signifies union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. It is because believers are united to Christ in the efficacy of his death, in the power of his resurrection, and in the fellowship of his grace that they are one body. They are united to Christ and therefore to one another. Of this union baptism is the sign and seal. The relationship which baptism signifies is therefore that of union, and union with Christ is its basic and central import.  

* The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Catechisms reflect a fine insight in this regard; cf. Confession of Faith, Chapter XXVIII, Sec-
We must bear in mind, however, that the formula which our Lord used in the institution of this ordinance is more inclusive than that of union with himself. Baptism is into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. It means therefore that a relation of union to the three persons of the Godhead is thereby signified. This is entirely consonant with the teaching of our Lord elsewhere regarding the union that is established by faith in him. It is not only union with himself but also with the Father and the Holy Spirit (cf. John 14:16, 17, 23; 17:21–23). Consequently baptism, by the very words of institution, signifies union with the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, and this means with the three persons of the trinity, both in the unity expressed by their joint possession of the one name and in the richness of the distinctive relationship which each person of the Godhead sustains to the people of God in the economy of the covenant of grace.

As was indicated above, we may not, however, exclude from the import of baptism the notion of purification. Baptism is dispensed by the application of water in a way that is expressive of cleansing. And it would be unreasonable to suppose that this action bears no analogy to that which is

Pierre Ch. Marcel, most recently, in his able treatment of the subject of baptism says: “Le baptême représente, figure et signifie la purification; la cène représente, figure et signifie la nourriture spirituelle” (La Revue Réformée, Oct., 1950, “Le Baptême, Sacrement de L’Alliance de Grace”, p. 21). Later on in this dissertation, however, Marcel develops quite fully the concept of union with Christ as the principal element in baptism (see pp. 106 ff.). He says: “Nous sommes vraiment incorporés au corps de Christ quand sa mort montre en nous son fruit. Cette communion, cette conformité en sa mort est l’élément principal du baptême, où nous est figuré non seulement notre purification, mais aussi notre mise à mort et la destruction du vieil homme” (ibid., p. 109).
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signified by it. There are two respects in which cleansing or purification takes place at the inception of the relationship which is signified and sealed by baptism, namely, purification from the defilement and purification from the guilt of sin.

There does not appear to be in the New Testament any passage which expressly says that baptism represents purification from the defilement of sin, that is to say, regeneration. But since baptism is washing with water, since it involves a religious use of water, and since regeneration is expressed elsewhere in terms of washing (John 3:5; Titus 3:5; I Cor. 6:11), it is difficult, if not impossible, to escape the conclusion that this washing with water involved in baptism represents that indispensable purification which is presupposed in union with Christ and without which no one can enter into the kingdom of God. There is also the consideration that baptism is the circumcision of the New Testament (Col. 2:11, 12). Circumcision, without doubt, symbolised purification from defilement. We should infer that baptism does also.

In reference to the other respect in which purification applies to the import of baptism there need be no question: it represents purification from the guilt of sin. Earlier it was maintained that the baptism of John and Christian baptism must not be identified. It does not follow that there is no similarity in respect of import. Both rites involved washing with water and we must therefore discover some element that will apply to both. John's baptism did have reference to the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). We should expect that such a reference could not be excluded from the import of Christian baptism. Such an expectation is confirmed by express intimation in other passages; Christian baptism stands in a similar relation to the remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16; I Pet. 3:21). We may therefore conclude that baptism represents the remission of sin or, in other words, purification from the guilt of sin by the sprinkling of the blood of Christ.

We may say then that baptism signifies union with Christ in the virtue of his death and the power of his resurrection, purification from the defilement of sin by the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit, and purification from the guilt of sin by the sprinkling of the blood of Christ. The emphasis must be placed, however, upon union with Christ. It is this that is
central, and it is this notion that appears more explicitly and pervasively than any other. Hence our view of baptism must be governed by this concept. Anything less than that kind of union expressed in the formula of institution will provide too restricted a conception and will distort our view of what is exhibited and sealed by this ordinance.

II
THE MODE OF BAPTISM

Baptism signifies and seals union with Christ and cleansing from the pollution and guilt of sin. The central import is that of union with Christ, ingrafting into him, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace. In reference to the mode of baptism the question is whether a particular method of applying water or of relating the person to water is of the essence of the symbolism.\(^3\) The Baptist contention is that the mode is of the essence of the symbolism and that, since to baptise means to immerse, baptism is not properly administered by any other mode. The Baptist argument rests mainly upon two contentions: (1) that \(\beta \alpha \pi \tau \iota \omega\) means to immerse\(^4\) and (2) that passages like Romans 6:3–6 and Colossians 2:11, 12 plainly imply that the death and resurrection of Christ provide us with the pattern for immersion in, and emergence from, the water.\(^5\)

We may now proceed to examine these two arguments.

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A. The Meaning of $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\iota\varsigma\omega$

*The Old Testament.* In the Septuagint $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\iota\varsigma\omega$ occurs very infrequently (II Kings 5:14; Isa. 21:4). In Isaiah 21:4 it is used in a figurative sense to translate the Hebrew word הָעָלָה which means to terrify, startle, or fall upon. It would appear that nothing very determinative regarding the precise import of $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\iota\varsigma\omega$ can be derived from this instance. In II Kings 5:14 the reference is to Naaman's baptising of himself seven times in Jordan, and $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\iota\varsigma\omega$ translates the Hebrew word אַלְכָּל. It is the word $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega$ which occurs most frequently in the Septuagint, occurring some seventeen times. In most of these instances it translates the Hebrew word אַלְכָּל just as $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\iota\varsigma\omega$ does in II Kings 5:14. אַלְכָּל means to dip or be moist with. In Leviticus 11:32 $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega$ translates the Hebrew word אַלְכָּל and no doubt refers to immersion — the articles concerned are put into water. In Psalm 68:23(24) $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega$ translates the Hebrew word יֵשָׁבָם which means to smite through. But the Greek seems to convey a different idea, one akin to that of the Hebrew word אַלְכָּל.

There need be no question then that אַלְכָּל means to dip and so also does $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega$ which is the Greek rendering. Furthermore, that $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega$ may also sometimes refer to immersion there need be no question. This appears in Leviticus 11:32. The question is whether אַלְכָּל and $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega$ necessarily refer to immersion and that they therefore mean to immerse. It can readily be shown that אַלְכָּל and $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega$ do not mean immersion. That is to say, the dipping denoted by אַלְכָּל and

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6 In the discussion which follows account is taken simply of instances appearing in the canonical books of the Old Testament. Furthermore, it is not deemed necessary to enter into a detailed discussion of each instance of $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega$ and $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\iota\varsigma\omega$. The purpose of our discussion is simply to show that $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega$ in the usage of the LXX does not mean immersion and that it cannot be shown that $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\iota\varsigma\omega$ means immersion. It is not forgotten, of course, that as able an immersionist as Alexander Carson allows that $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega$ does not always mean to dip but that it also has a secondary and derived meaning, namely, to dye (cf. op. cit., pp. 18 ff.). Other immersionists, however, do not concede as much as Carson. In any case it is well to review the Old Testament usage in reference to $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega$. This provides a necessary and suitable introduction to the New Testament usage in reference to $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\iota\varsigma\omega$ and its cognates. For discussion of Isaiah 21:4 cf. Robert Wilson: *op. cit.*, pp. 178 f., 267 ff.
\(\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega\) is not always to be equated with immersion. This fact that dipping is not equivalent to immersion needs to be stressed at the outset. Far too often in anti-baptist discussions this fact is overlooked and a good deal of unnecessary argumentation arises from the oversight.

In Leviticus 14:6, 51 we have the ritual prescribed for the cleansing of a leper and of a house in which the plague of leprosy appeared. The priest was to take the cedar wood and the scarlet and the hyssop and the living bird and dip them in the blood of the bird that was slain. It is obvious that a living bird cannot be immersed in the blood of another bird. It may be dipped in such blood but such dipping could not be immersion. Here is a clear case where \(\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega\) is used to denote an action that cannot be construed as immersion. And so \(\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega\) does not mean immersion. It can refer to an action performed by immersion but it can also refer to an action that does not involve immersion at all. Hence there is no reason arising from the meaning of the word \(\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega\) why in any instance of its occurrence it should refer to immersion. When it does refer to immersion our knowledge that this is the case is not derived from the word \(\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega\) but from other considerations.

It is also worthy of note that in these two instances the live bird was to be baptised into the blood \((\epsilon\iota\sigma \tau\vartheta \alpha\iota\mu\alpha)\) of the slain bird. Hence even "baptism into" \((\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega \epsilon\iota\sigma)\) does not mean to immerse, and the preposition "into" does not add any force to the argument that \(\beta\alpha\pi\tau\omega\) means to immerse.\(^6\)

\(^6\) An objection to the validity of the argument drawn from Leviticus 14:6,51 could be urged on the basis of the consideration that the blood of the bird that was slain flowed into the living water in the earthenware vessel and that it was not simply in the blood of the slain bird that the living bird, the cedar wood, the scarlet, and the hyssop were dipped but in the mixture of water and blood in the earthenware vessel. This is the view of able commentators such as Keil and Delitzsch, S. H. Kellogg, J. P. Lange and others. If this view of the ritual could be proven, the position taken above would have to be modified. For it might be maintained that, in such a case, there could be enough fluid for immersion of the four items specified. There are, however, two things to be said in reference to this objection. (1) Even on the supposition that it was in a mixture of blood and water that the items were dipped, it is not apparent that there would have been enough fluid for purposes of immersion. (2) The terms of the passage do not indicate that the procedure
In Leviticus 14:16 we have another instance which, while not as plainly conclusive as Leviticus 14:6, 51, nevertheless, points in the same direction. This has reference to the sprinkling of oil. The priest took some of the log of oil and poured it into the palm of his left hand. Then he dipped his right finger in the oil that was in the palm of his left hand and sprinkled the oil seven times before the Lord. Now it may be possible to pour into the cupped left hand enough oil so that the right finger may be immersed in this oil. But it is not an easy performance. The passage concerned does not indicate any such requirement. All that is prescribed is dipping of the right finger in the oil which is in the palm of the left hand, and it is quite unreasonable to suppose that immersion of that right finger was required. Dipping of the right finger in the oil was all that was requisite for the sprinkling which followed, and dipping without the necessity of immersion is rather plainly indicated to be the action in view.

Again in Ruth 2:14 we have the word of Boaz to Ruth: “dip thy morsel in the vinegar”. It would be quite unreasonable to insist that the custom to which Boaz referred was to immerse one’s morsel in the vinegar. On the other hand the idea of dipping something in vinegar is reasonable and natural. No doubt that was what Boaz had in mind.

was such as is supposed in this objection. Leviticus 14:6 says simply that the four items were dipped “in the blood of the bird that had been slain upon the living water”. And in Leviticus 14:51,52 the blood of the bird that had been slain and the living water are distinguished. In verse 51 it is distinctly specified that the four items were to be dipped “in the blood of the slain bird, and in the living water”. Verse 52, again, distinguishes between the blood of the slain bird and the living water, just as it distinguishes between the living bird and the other three items. “And he shall cleanse the house with the blood of the bird, and with the living water, and with the living bird, and with the cedar-wood, and with the hyssop, and with the scarlet.”

If the Talmud should be appealed to in support of the view that the blood and the living water were mixed (see tractate Negaim, Chapter XIV, Mishnah 1), it should be borne in mind that the tradition referred to in this tractate distinctly provided that only a quarter of a log of living water was put in the earthenware vessel. Obviously a quarter of a log of water, together with the blood of the slain bird, would not provide enough fluid for immersion of the living bird, not to speak of the additional items which were to be dipped.
This same meaning of βάπτω could also apply in I Samuel 14:27, where we are told that Jonathan put forth the end of the rod that was in his hand and dipped it in the honey. In this case it is of course not unreasonable to suppose that the end of the rod was completely covered by the honey. But it is not necessary to suppose this.

What we have found is this: there is one clear case where βάπτω and even βάπτω εἶδ does not mean and cannot mean immersion (Lev. 14:6, 51); there is the other case where it is unreasonable to suppose that immersion was required or took place (Lev. 14:16); there is still another instance where dipping but not immersion is the reasonable and natural supposition (Ruth 2:14); finally, in the case of I Samuel 14:27 immersion is not unreasonable but it is not by any means necessary to the action denoted. Hence we have no reason to suppose that in a great many other instances immersion is the action denoted by βάπτω. In other words, we have no ground upon which to insist that in Exodus 12:22; Leviticus 4:6, 17; 9:9; Numbers 19:18; Deuteronomy 33:24; II Kings 8:15 immersion is the mode of action referred to in the respective cases. There is nothing in the Hebrew word used nor in the context of the passages concerned which requires immersion. And the Greek word βάπτω, as we have just found, does not require immersion. So we are compelled to conclude that there is nothing to show that in any of these instances just cited immersion was practised or even suggested. And returning to II Kings 5:14, the case of Naaman, where we have βαπτίζω rather than βάπτω, this instance cannot be adduced to prove that Naaman immersed himself in Jordan. Without doubt he bathed himself in Jordan; but there is no evidence derived from the terms used either in Hebrew or Greek, or from the details of the narrative, to prove that Naaman immersed himself. Again, Joshua 3:15 cannot be adduced to prove that the priests' feet were immersed in Jordan. We are told that their feet were baptised in the brink of the river. It is quite possible that their feet were immersed in the water. But there is nothing to prove this. Dipping of their feet in the brink of the river is all that is necessary to satisfy the terms used both in Hebrew and
Greek. Besides, in verse 13 we are told that, when the soles of the feet of the priests would rest in Jordan, the waters would be cut off and stand in one heap. In verses 15 and 16 we are told that, when the feet of the priests were dipped in the brink of the river, the waters stood and rose up in one heap. Surely the kind of contact with the water, mentioned in verse 13, satisfies the terms of verse 15. To demand more for dipping than the resting of the soles of the priests' feet in the water would be indefensible.

In all of the passages so far considered there is only one instance where βάπτω clearly refers to an action which involved immersion. It is the case of Leviticus 11:32. It is also highly probable that in Job 9:31 the idea corresponds to that of immersion. At least the idea is much stronger than that of mere dipping and is more akin to that of plunging. Only in these two passages is the idea of immersion required to express the action denoted by βάπτω.

There are still two passages to be considered: Daniel 4:30 (LXX vs. 33); 5:21. In these instances βάπτω translates the Aramaic verb ṣaβ. This Aramaic verb occurs elsewhere in the book of Daniel (cf. 4:12, 20, 22). But only in 4:30; 5:21 is it translated by the Greek verb βάπτω. The Septuagint rendering of the clause in question in each case is: καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀποθάνου τοῦ ὀψαλμοῦ τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ ἐβάφη. This refers to Nebuchadnezzar whose body was bathed with the dew of heaven. It is possible that the meaning of the Greek rendering is that his body was dipped in the dew of heaven, that is to say, dipped in the dew with which the herbs and grass of the field were drenched. It may be that the thought expressed is that his body was drenched or bathed from the dew of heaven. On the other hand, the meaning may be as weak as that his body was simply moist or wet with the dew of heaven. In any case the thought cannot be adjusted to the notion that his body was immersed in the dew of heaven. This would require the most arbitrary and unnatural twisting of the terms and would amount to unreason in the lowest degree. So again we have an instance of the use of βάπτω in another sense than that of immersion. Therefore it does not mean immersion.
The New Testament. In the usage of the New Testament βάπτω recedes into the background and βαπτίζω comes into the foreground. The former occurs only four times (Luke 16:24; John 13:26(2); Rev. 19:13) whereas the latter seventy five to eighty times. There are twenty occurrences of the substantive βάπτισμα and three of βαπτισμός.

In determining the meaning of these terms used to denote baptism it must be remembered again that the question is not whether they may be used to denote an action performed by immersion. It is not our interest to deny that they may be used to denote such an action. The question is whether these terms mean immersion and therefore always imply in one way or another the act of immersion and could not properly denote an action performed by any other mode. This is the precise question that is relevant to the Baptist contention. And we are concerned now to deal with the evidence which the New Testament itself presents. The thesis which we are propounding is that the terms for baptism are used to denote actions which were not performed by the mode of immersion and that, while these terms could refer to immersion, yet they do not mean immersion. In other words, we undertake to show that the Baptist contention that βαπτίζω and its cognates mean immersion is not borne out by the evidence and that βαπτίζω can be used to denote an action which neither indicates nor implies immersion. We propose to show this by appeal to several passages and groups of passages.

1. Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:2–5; Luke 11:38.

In Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:2–5 we have express allusion to the custom of the Jews, called "the tradition of the elders", to wash their hands before eating bread. "Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread" (Matt. 15:2). "For the Pharisees and all the Jews, except they wash their hands, do not eat, holding the tradition of the elders" (Mark 7:3). There is some uncertainty as to the precise force of the word πυγμή in the clause, ἐὰν μὴ πυγμῇ νίψονται τὰς χεῖρας, whether it refers to the wrist or to the fist. Both Lightfoot and Edersheim claim that according to Jewish custom there
were two ways of washing the hands before eating, namely, by dipping the hands in water or by pouring water over the hands. In the former case πυγμή may refer to the washing of one hand with the cupped fist of the other. In the latter case there is every good reason for believing that πυγμή refers to the wrist. It is distinctly provided in the Talmudic tractate Yadayim that water was to be poured over the hands to the wrist. Chapter II, Mishnah 3, reads as follows: “Hands become unclean and are made clean as far as the wrist. How so? If he poured the first water over the hands as far as the wrist and poured the second water over the hands beyond the wrist and the latter flowed back to the hands, the hands nevertheless become clean.” It would appear that Edersheim is correct when he says, “Accordingly, the words of St. Mark can only mean that the Pharisees eat not ‘except they wash their hands to the wrist’.” In any case it is a washing of the hands that is in view and, most probably, washing of the hands up to the wrist.

In Luke 11:38 this same tradition is referred to when we are told that the Pharisee marvelled because Jesus “had not first baptised himself before dinner” (οὐ πρῶτον ἐβαπτίσθη πρὸ τοῦ ἀριστου). There is no reason to suppose that anything else than the tradition referred to above is in view here, and everything would point to that conclusion. The important observation now is that this tradition is described as baptising oneself (for this is the force of the form ἐβαπτίσθη)


In appealing to the Talmud caution has to be exercised. The committal to writing of a great many of these traditions is later than the early Christian era. There is often doubt as to the antiquity of some of these traditions, and so in many cases we cannot be sure that they go back as far as the first century of the Christian era. However, the rabbinic tradition embodied in the Talmud in many instances antedates the Christian era and we can discover in the Talmud that which exactly corresponds to the traditions so frequently condemned by our Lord. Hence there is oftentimes a great deal of help derived from the Talmud in the interpretation of the New Testament.

8 Op. cit. p. 11
and provides evidence that \( \beta\alpha\nu\rho\tau\iota\chi\omega \) can be used with reference to an action which did not involve immersing oneself. Washing the hands by dipping them in water or, more probably, by pouring water upon them can be called baptism.

It is quite unwarranted to insist that on this occasion (Luke 11:38) there must be allusion to the Jewish practice of immersion and that what the Pharisee expected on this occasion was that Jesus should have plunged himself in water. There is no evidence to support such a supposition and the evidence is decidedly against it. Jewish tradition, it is true, did prescribe immersion in certain cases of uncleanness. *Seder Tohoroth* in the Babylonian Talmud includes several tractates which evince these prescriptions, and the tractate *Mikwaoth* deals expressly with the bathing-pool which served these purposes.\(^9\) In this bathing-pool persons as well as vessels and other articles were immersed. But rabbinic tradition prescribed immersion not for the washing and purification which preceded eating, as in this case, but for the uncleanness contracted by such things as leprosy and various kinds of running issue.\(^10\) These tractates deal with the way in which such uncleanness was to be removed. There is no evidence that the Pharisee, in the instance of Luke 11:38, would or could have considered Jesus as having contracted such defilement as, in accordance

\(^9\) *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Tohoroth* (as cited), pp. 419 ff.

\(^10\) Cf. the Talmudic tractate *Kelim*, Chapter I, Mishnah 5 (*The Babylonian Talmud* as cited, pp. 9 ff.); the Talmudic tractate *Negaim*, Chapter XIV, Mishnah 2, 3, 8 (*The Babylonian Talmud* as cited, pp. 292 ff.). It is noteworthy in this connection that the Old Testament prescriptions for the cleansing of uncleanness arising from leprosy or a running issue or the seed of copulation *etc.* do not stipulate that the bathing required be by immersion. It was distinctly prescribed that the person to be cleansed should bathe himself in water. Sometimes the expression used is that he bathe his flesh in water and on at least one occasion it is said that he must bathe *all* his flesh in water (Lev. 15:16). But the terms used for such bathing are not such as to require immersion. In Hebrew the term is יִפְרָע and in the LXX λουω (cf. Lev. 14:8, 9; 15:1–33). It may be that in many cases the bathing was performed by immersion. But this was not stipulated and there were many circumstances under which it would be most difficult, if not impossible, for immersion to take place (cf. especially Lev. 15:13). The important consideration is that immersion was not prescribed (cf. for a discussion of Mosaic purifications Edward Beecher: *Baptism in reference to its Import and Modes*, New York, 1849, pp. 32 ff.).
with rabbinic prescription and tradition, required immersion for purification. In other words, there is no evidence which would indicate that the Pharisee expected of Jesus anything more than the washing referred to in Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:3, a washing of the hands as far as the wrist, either by pouring water over them or by dipping them in water. The significant fact is that such washing is referred to as baptising oneself.

These passages offer another relevant datum. It concerns Mark 7:4, and is to the effect that the Jews on returning from the market-place do not eat except they wash themselves. Some question has been raised as to whether this refers to the purifying of their own bodies or to the purifying of the food brought from the market. While it might not be impossible for the form in which the verb appears to bear this latter sense yet the terms used do not suggest it and the context provides strong presumption against it. The preceding verse refers to the washing of the hands before eating and verse 5 brings us back to the same tradition in the question addressed by the Pharisees and Scribes: “Why do thy disciples walk contrary to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with defiled hands?” It would be natural to relate the statement of verse 4 — “and when they come from the market-place they do not eat except they wash” — to the precise tradition mentioned in verses 3 and 5.

An observation to which interest and importance attach is that there is a variant in the manuscript authority. Some manuscripts use the word βαπτίζω in verse 4, others the word βαπτίζω. The latter means to sprinkle, and so the rendering in this case would be: “and when they come from the market-place they do not eat except they sprinkle themselves”. If this reading is correct then this passage offers proof that sprinkling was regarded by the Jews as a proper mode for the removal of defilement. We should have to suppose that the intercourse of the market-place was regarded by the Jews as increasing the defilement and it would be reasonable to think that the purification required for this defilement would be more elaborate or extensive than that which was ordinarily necessary before eating, that is to say, more extensive than the mere washing of the hands. The reading “to sprinkle” would very readily supply the answer to this more extensive purification.
If we were to adopt the reading which uses the word βαπτίζω, this might appear to give support to the Baptist contention that immersion is the practice alluded to. In other words, it may be argued that while, ordinarily, all that is requisite before eating is the washing of the hands yet after the intercourse of the market-place the total washing of immersion is requisite. And it could be argued that this is the force of the distinction made between the requisition referred to in verse 3 and that referred to in verse 4. Additional support might be derived from the consideration that in the latter part of verse 4 the "baptism of cups and pots and brazen vessels" are adduced as examples of the traditions in view, baptisms which were presumptively performed by immersion.\(^{11}\)

There is no good reason for controverting the validity of this argument provided evidence could be adduced to prove that after return from the market-place rabbinic or Pharisaic tradition required immersion before eating. In that event this

\(^{11}\) There is good reason to believe that the "baptisms of cups and pots and brazen vessels", referred to in Mark 7:4, refer to immersion (cf. the Talmudic tractate Kelim, Chapter XXV, Mishnah 3, 5). The reference to the baptism of "couches" (καταγωγή) does not appear in several manuscripts. Hence the text is in question. There need be no question, however, that the Jews did require the purification of couches and beds (cf. Lev. 15:20). Edward Beecher, for example, does not appear to be on stable ground when he says, "But above all, the immersion of the couches on which they reclined at meals is out of the question" (op. cit., p. 39; cf. Robert Wilson: op. cit., pp. 229 f.). Apart from the question as to whether or not the reference in this case is to the immersion of couches (even assuming that the text is correct), Beecher's flat denial of the possibility of a reference to immersion does not appear to be warranted. The Talmudic tractate Kelim, again, indicates that in rabbinic tradition provision was made that beds might be purified in parts and even for the dismantling of beds in order to purification by immersion (see Chapter XVIII, Mishnah 9; Chapter XIX, Mishnah 1. The relevant words in the latter are, "If a man dismantled a bed in order that he might immerse it..."). Alexander Carson, without appealing to these rabbinic provisions and without appeal to the Talmud, observes with good warrant: "the couches might have been so constructed, that they might be conveniently taken to pieces, for the purpose of purification" (op. cit., p. 76). It is not now being contended, of course, that the baptism of couches necessarily refers to immersion. All that is being maintained is that we are not justified in appealing to Mark 7:4b to show that βαπτίζωδες cannot here imply immersion. For diversity of mode in Levitical prescription cf. Robert Wilson: op. cit., pp. 228 f.
would be a case in which the word \( \beta \alpha \pi \tau \iota \varsigma \omega \) would be used with reference to an action that was performed by immersion. We are not in the least concerned to deny that \( \beta \alpha \pi \tau \iota \varsigma \omega \) can be thus used any more than are we interested in denying that in the latter part of verse 4 the word \( \beta \alpha \pi \tau \iota \rho \iota \mu \delta \) is used with reference to actions which were performed by the mode of immersion. In other words, let us grant to the fullest extent that in verse 4 the verb \( \beta \alpha \pi \tau \iota \varsigma \omega \) and the noun \( \beta \alpha \pi \tau \iota \rho \iota \mu \delta \) are used with reference to acts of immersion, this by no means proves that either the verb or the noun \textit{means} immersion in such a way that neither of them could be used with reference to an action performed by another mode. To adduce cases in which "baptise" or "baptism" is used to denote an action performed by immersion does not prove that they \textit{mean} immersion. Our inquiry now is conducted to the end of showing simply that "to baptise" does not \textit{mean} "to immerse".

There are, however, two premises upon which rests the argument that in verse 4a we have an instance of the use of \( \beta \alpha \pi \tau \iota \varsigma \omega \) to denote an action performed by immersion: (1) that \( \beta \alpha \pi \tau \iota \varsigma \omega \) is the proper reading; (2) that there is good evidence that on returning from the market-place immersion was the rabbinic requisition. Neither of these premises is substantiated. To say the least, there is doubt as to both. Hence the argument is not established. And it must be remembered that in Luke 11:38 we have an instance of the use of \( \beta \alpha \pi \tau \iota \varsigma \omega \) with reference to an act of washing or cleansing which, in accordance with Matthew 15:2 and Mark 7:3, was performed by washing the hands. So there is no proof that in Mark 7:4a the word \( \beta \alpha \pi \tau \iota \varsigma \omega \) is used in the sense of immersion.


In verse 10 we have the expression "divers baptisms" (\( \delta \iota \alpha \varphi \beta \rho \omicron \upsilon \sigma \theta \iota \varsigma \rho \omicron \varsigma \delta \varsigma \)). The allusion is to various symbolical lustrations of the Old Testament. The word "divers" indicates that lustratory rites of various kinds are in view. It is not probable, however, that all the lustratory rites are contemplated. It is likely that those which had more direct relevance to the purification of persons are intended; the preceding verse, which is closely coordinated with verse 10, is concerned
with the gifts and sacrifices which could not make him that performed the service perfect as to the conscience. But even if we recognise this delimitation we have still to note that lustrations of various kinds are envisaged.

The significance of this passage as it bears upon our present interest is that the "divers baptisms" referred to in verse 10 must surely include the lustrations expressly referred to in the succeeding verses. In these verses a contrast is drawn between the intrinsic ineffectiveness, or at least relative ineffectiveness, of the ritual ordinances of the Levitical economy and the transcendent efficacy and perfection of Christ's purificatory and expiatory work. In a word, the imperfection of the Levitical lustrations is contrasted with the lustration once for all perfected by Christ. In this sustained contrast every lustratory rite that comes within the writer's purview must be included in the "divers baptisms" of verse 10. And that simply means that the lustratory rites mentioned in the succeeding context must come within the scope of the "divers baptisms".

In verse 13 one of these lustratory ordinances is expressly stated to have been performed by sprinkling — "for if the blood of goats and bulls and ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh". When we bear in mind that here a lustratory rite of the old economy is contrasted in respect of its efficacy with the finality and perfection of the blood of Christ and when we remember that it was precisely this thought of relative ineffectiveness that prompted the reference to "divers baptisms", it becomes exegetically impossible to exclude this rite, or these rites, of verse 13 from the scope of the "divers baptisms". And this means that a lustratory rite performed by sprinkling can be called a baptism.

Again in verse 19 reference is made to the sprinkling of the book and all the people, and in verse 21 to the sprinkling of the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry (cf. Exod. 24:6-8). These ordinances are expressly stated in verse 23 to have been purificatory. We cannot exclude them from the scope of the "divers baptisms" of verse 10.

We must conclude, therefore, that the word "baptism" refers to an action that can be performed by sprinkling as well as by any other mode. It cannot, therefore, mean immersion.
Besides, we know that several of the Levitical lustrations, in addition to those mentioned in this chapter, were performed by sprinkling (cf. Lev. 14:4–7, 16, 49–53, 16:19; Numb. 8:5–7; 19:18, 19). If the Baptist argument is valid then the "divers baptisms" of Hebrews 9:10 will have to be restricted to those lustratory rites which were performed by immersion and must exclude the most significant lustratory rites and actions of the old economy. On the face of it such a supposition is arbitrary. When examined it becomes quite untenable. For what lustratory rites are more pertinent to the contrast instituted than those which were performed by other modes than that of immersion, examples of which are given in the succeeding context? And what immersions, prescribed in the Old Testament, are directly pertinent to the precise thought of this passage and will satisfy the description, "divers baptisms"?

This passage, therefore, provides us with an instance of the use of the word "baptism" (βαπτισμός) to denote actions which do not involve immersion. Baptism does not mean immersion but can refer to actions performed by other modes. This is what we might expect to be the case in such a passage as Hebrews 9:10. As we think of the diverse modes of cleansing in the Old Testament, sprinkling stands out most promi-

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12 There are so many instances of sprinkling in the ritual of the Mosaic economy that it is not necessary to give the citations. In connection with the blood of the sacrifices no action of the priest was more prominent than the sprinkling of the blood. And the significance of sprinkling is shown by nothing more than by the fact that when the high priest went into the holiest of all once a year on the great day of atonement he sprinkled the blood of the sin-offerings seven times before the mercy-seat and upon the mercy-seat (Lev. 16:14, 15). That this sprinkling had reference to cleansing appears from Leviticus 16:19: "And he shall sprinkle with the blood upon it (the altar) with his finger seven times, and cleanse it, and hallow it from the uncleannesses of the children of Israel". The Hebrew words used for the act of sprinkling are פָּצָה and פָּשַׁח. Ezekiel 36:25 indicates as clearly as any text in the Old Testament the purificatory significance of sprinkling and the adequacy of sprinkling as a mode of purification. "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you."


14 This is a cogent question. It is difficult to know what immersions of the Levitical economy could be adduced to meet the requirements of this passage.
nently as one of the modes and appears in some of the most distinctive lustratory rites. It would be strange indeed if such rites were not in view in the expression, "divers baptisms".

3.1 The Baptism of the Spirit.

John the Baptist contrasted his own baptism with water with the baptism which Jesus was to dispense: "I indeed baptise you with water unto repentance... He shall baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11; cf. Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16). Without question there is here an express allusion to Pentecost. Acts 1:5 and 11:16 confirm this, for in these passages the contrast between John's baptism and that of Jesus is instituted in connection with Pentecost: "John indeed baptised with water, but ye shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days hence" (Acts 1:5). The coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost was undoubtedly baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire.

If baptism means immersion then the statement of John that Jesus would baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire must mean strictly "he shall immerse in the Holy Spirit and fire", and any language used with reference to the baptism of the Spirit, however figurative it may be, cannot depart from or violate this basic meaning. In other words, the symbolism cannot represent an entirely diverse mode of the relation of the disciples to the Holy Spirit and of the Holy Spirit to them.

But what we actually find is that the baptism of the Spirit is referred to in terms that are quite contrary to the idea of immersion and in fact preclude it. In Acts 1:8 the Holy Spirit is represented as coming upon the disciples: "Ye shall receive power after that the Holy Spirit has come upon you". The verb is ἐπέρχομαι and conveys the notion of "coming down upon". In Acts 2:17, 33 the Holy Spirit is represented as having been poured out, and the verb is ἐκχέω.14 In Acts 10:44; 11:15 the Holy Spirit is represented as having fallen upon the persons concerned, and the verb is ἐπανεπέπτωσεν.

It is surely significant that the terms in each case are those

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14 Cf., also, Titus 3:6 where the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of regeneration and renewal is said to have been "poured out" on us richly.
of affusion and not of immersion. Yet it is precisely this affusion that is called the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the baptism with fire, referred to in the texts cited above, received its symbolic fulfilment, to say the least, in the cloven tongues like as of fire that sat upon the disciples at Pentecost (καὶ ἐκαθίσαν ἐφ’ ἑν ἐκαστὸν αὐτῶν). If this is baptism with fire or, at least, the external symbol and sign of the baptism with fire, this baptism cannot be adjusted to the notion of immersion. But to the notion of immersion this phenomenon must be adjusted if the Baptist argument is correct that baptism means immersion.

It is not without relevance in this same connection that in the Old Testament the giving of the Spirit, in some cases explicitly referring to Pentecost, is promised in terms of pouring out, shedding forth, and sprinkling (Isa. 32:15; Joel 2:28; Prov. 1:23; Ezek. 36:25–27 where the Hebrew words are הַלְּעַ, יָפָ and קְרִ meaning respectively to pour out, shed forth, and sprinkle). The language of the Old Testament provides the imagery of the New Testament and is quite foreign to the notion of immersion.


Baptism symbolises, represents, and seals the application to us of the blood of Christ for the removal of the guilt of sin. The figure used in the New Testament for this application of the blood of Christ is that of sprinkling (Hebrews 9:13, 14, 22; 10:22; 12:24; 1 Pet. 1:2). It would be strange if the baptism with water which represents the sprinkling of the blood of Christ could not properly and most significantly be performed by sprinkling. It cannot be too frequently insisted that according to Scripture cleansing from the guilt of sin is adequately and effectively administered by the mode of sprinkling no less than by the modes of affusion and immersion.15

Sufficient evidence has been presented to show that in the usage of the New Testament βαπτιζω does not mean to immerse. It can be used with reference to immersion but it can

15 Cf. the discussion of Hebrews 9:10 above and particularly footnote 12.
also be used with reference to affusion and sprinkling. The New Testament, therefore, confirms the conclusions derived from the study of the Old Testament. Both Testaments mutually support each other in this respect.

It is, however, necessary to consider several other passages in the New Testament because they have been appealed to on both sides of the argument; some of them have been used by anti-immersionists and some by immersionists. It is necessary to examine them in order to determine whether they lend any weight to the argument in favour of or against the immersionist contention.

(a) *I Corinthians* 10:2. "All were baptised unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea." If the Baptist argument is correct, then there must be allusion to the mode of baptism in this text. At least, in order to satisfy the terms of the passage the children of Israel would have to be regarded as having been immersed in the cloud and in the sea.\(^6\) Now it is only too apparent that they were not immersed in the sea — they passed through the sea upon dry ground. They did not enter into the water nor did the water come upon them (cf. Exod. 14:22). And as respects the cloud the reference is surely to the pillar of cloud that went before the children of Israel by day, a cloud that did not come upon them and into which they did not enter (cf. Exod. 13:21). So the word \(\beta\alpha\nu\rho\tau\iota\varsigma\omega\) is used here with reference to an event or series of events which did not involve immersion in any way.

If the Baptist should retort that, since the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea (Exod. 14:22), were thus below the level of the water and hemmed in by it on both sides, they could be regarded as immersed in the sea, then we have the strange notion that to be below the level of the water amounts to immersion, even though the water comes into no contact whatsoever with our bodies. If this is the case, we shall have to revise our concept of

\(^6\) John Gill says with reference to this passage that it was "a figure of baptism by immersion; as the Israelites were under the cloud, and so under water, and covered with it, as persons baptized by immersion are; and passed through the sea, that standing up as a wall on both sides them, with the cloud over them; thus surrounded they were as persons immersed in water, and so said to be baptized" (*op. cit.*, p. 311).
immersion to such an extent that it will be very different from that which is required by the Baptist contention. Besides, even if it were allowed that the going into the midst of the sea conforms to the idea of immersion, we must also take into account the cloud in which the children of Israel were baptised. There is no evidence that the children of Israel entered into the cloud or that the cloud came upon them.

The main relevance of this passage is simply that the word βαπτίζω can be used without any intimation or suggestion of mode, that βαπτίζω itself does not express mode, and, particularly, that it does not mean to immerse.

(b) Acts 8:26–40. Anti-immersionists have appealed to this text in support of their own contention. They argue that since this was desert it would be improbable, if not impossible, to find enough water for purposes of immersion. This is not a valid argument. There is the possibility of sufficient water for such a purpose and the terms used would indicate that there was a well or pool or stream of water. Anti-immersionists cannot prove that there was not sufficient water for immersion. Neither can it be proved that the Ethiopian eunuch was not immersed by Philip.

It becomes equally necessary, however, to show that the Baptist appeal to this text to prove immersion is indefensible. The text does not prove that Philip immersed the eunuch. Such an inference may seem to be contradicted by the express terms of the passage. Is it not said that both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water (καὶ κατέβησαν ἀμφότεροι εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ) and that they came up out of the water (ἀνέβησαν ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος)? Is not immersion implied in the prepositions “into” and “out of”? The fact is that immersion cannot be established by such expressions. It should be noted that Philip as well as the eunuch went down into the water and came up out of the water. If such expressions imply or prove immersion, then they mean that Philip immersed himself as well as the eunuch. But such a supposition is quite unreason-

17 Cf. John Gill: op. cit., p. 309. Calvin, whom Gill quotes at this point says with reference to Acts 8:38: “Here we see what was the manner of baptising among the ancients, for they plunged the whole body into the water: now the use is, that the minister only sprinkles the body or the head”.
able. Why should Philip have immersed himself, and why would Luke be so anxious to inform us that Philip immersed himself as well as the eunuch?

It is not now maintained that Philip did not immerse the eunuch when he baptised him. That may have been the mode in this case. But what is to be recognised is—a fact too frequently ignored in the Baptist argumentation—that this passage does not prove immersion. The expressions, “they both went down into the water” and “they came up out of the water” are satisfied by the thought that they both went down to the water, stood on the brink or stepped into the edge, and that Philip baptised the eunuch by scooping up the water and pouring it or sprinkling it on him. This is all that can be shown to have occurred. As far as the going into, and coming up out of, the water are concerned nothing is stated in respect of the eunuch that is not also in respect of Philip himself. Hence there is no proof of immersion in this passage. What the actual mode was we simply do not know, and this text does not support the Baptist contention.

(c) The Baptism of John. The baptism of John is said to have been in Jordan (ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνῃ ποταμῷ—Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:5) and into Jordan (εἰς τὸν Ἰορδάνην—Mark 1:9). He also baptised in Aïnon near to Salim because there was much water there (ἐδαπαταὶ πολλὰ ἥν ἐκεῖ—John 3:23).

At the outset it should be understood that John may have baptised by the mode of immersion; there does not appear to be evidence by which immersion could be disproved. Furthermore, if John baptised by the mode of immersion there is in this very consideration a good reason for choosing Jordan and Aïnon as the sites of administration—there was abundant water in both places. And the expressions used with reference to Jordan, namely, “in the river Jordan” and “into the Jordan” could readily be taken as reflecting, to some extent at least, on the actual mode. ¹⁸ The point upon which emphasis must be placed is that the expressions used and the consideration mentioned in reference to Aïnon, that there was much water there, do not prove that immersion was the mode and that the exigencies of immersion were the reasons

for choosing Jordan and Aín. There are several other sufficient reasons why Jordan and Aín should have been chosen.

We know only too well that in Palestine water supplies were jealously prized and guarded, and we know how friction sometimes developed over the use of water supplies. To say the least, it would have been prejudicial to John's ministry for him to have baptised except where there was abundant water. Large multitudes came to John's baptism. It would have been disrupting to a local community and an interference with their needs for large multitudes to congregate around limited water supplies. Apart from the actual water used for baptism, it would have been interference amounting to impropriety to deprive people of ready access to the water supply requisite for their daily needs.

Again, apart from the consideration of the water used in baptism and apart from the impropriety of interference with the needs of a local community, it would be necessary to seek a place of much water in order to meet the needs of those who congegated. Oftentimes the people who came to John's baptism came long distances. In many cases it is altogether likely that animals were used for conveyance. Those who came would therefore need water for their own use and for the use of the animals they may have brought. It is obvious that a place of much water would be indispensable.

We have thus a whole series of considerations which coalesce to show that a place of much water was requisite apart from the question of immersion. Hence the choosing of Jordan and Aín does not prove that these places were selected because they afforded the amount of water requisite for immersion.

The expressions, "in the river Jordan" and "into the Jordan" do not prove immersion. As far as the expression "in the river Jordan" is concerned it may be nothing more than a designation of location just as "baptising in Aín" in John 3:23 designates location. Consequently, the expression "in the river Jordan" proves nothing respecting the mode of John's baptism. And as far as the expression "into Jordan" is concerned we found already that even such an expression as "going down into the water" does not necessarily imply immersion. Standing in the water or on the brink of the river would satisfy completely the idea expressed.
(d) Acts 2:41; 10:47; 16:33. These passages have sometimes been adduced to disprove immersion. But they establish no such conclusion. There is nothing in the actual circumstances of these instances of baptism which makes immersion impossible. On the other hand, there is nothing to suggest, far less to require, immersion. Hence it is far better not to appeal to such passages in this debate. An argument is only weakened in its effectiveness when it is supported by irrelevant or inconclusive data.

**Conclusion.** On the basis of such considerations as these, derived from both Old and New Testaments, we are led to the conclusion that though the word βαπτίζω and its cognates can be used to denote an action performed by immersion yet they may also be used to denote an action that can be performed by a variety of modes. Consequently the word βαπτίζω itself cannot be pleaded as an argument for the necessity of immersion as the mode of baptism.

It is still possible, however, that other evidence could be presented to show that immersion belongs to the essence of the symbolism. We turn, therefore, to the other phase of the Baptist argument in support of the thesis that immersion is the only proper mode of baptism.

**B. The Burial and Resurrection of Christ**

The two passages upon which the greater part of this phase of the argument for immersion rests are Romans 6:2–6; Colossians 2:11, 12. In essence the argument is that, since baptism represents union with Christ in his death and resurrection, immersion in water and emergence from it provide an analogy which graphically portrays that which is represented and sealed by baptism. Romans 6:3, 4 would appear to indicate such symbolism: “Or are ye ignorant that as many as were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, even so we should walk in newness of life.” But more careful analysis will show that there is no necessary allusion to the mode of baptism.
It is beyond dispute that the leading thought of the apostle here is that of union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. And verses 5 and 6 are confirmatory. They carry on the same thought in different terms: “For if we have become planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in that of the resurrection: knowing this that our old man has been crucified with him, in order that the body of sin might be destroyed, to the end that we should no longer serve sin”.

Paul is here dealing with the antinomian argument and, in order to rebut it, he sets forth the particular phases of union with Christ that are peculiarly adapted to that purpose, namely, union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. He does this to show that every one who is united to Christ is, by virtue of the efficacy of Christ’s death and the power of his resurrection, freed from the dominion of sin, lives a new resurrection life, and therefore cannot make his Christian faith and profession a plea for, or an inducement to, continuance in sin. Baptism, by which the Christian profession is registered and sealed, means baptism into union with Christ, and Paul is here stressing what such union means, particularly in reference to the death and resurrection of Christ. Believers died with Christ, they were planted together in the likeness of his death, they were buried with him, they were crucified with him, they were raised up with him and planted together in the likeness of his resurrection.

It is very easy to focus attention upon one or two of the terms which Paul here uses and make it appear that the indispensible mode of baptism is after the analogy of what we have arbitrarily selected. It is very easy to point to the expression “buried with him” in verse 4 and insist that only immersion provides any analogy to burial. But such procedure fails to take account of all that Paul says here. It should be noted that Paul not only says “buried together” (συνετάφημεν) but also “planted together” (σύμφυτοι) and “crucified together” (συνεσταυρώθη). These latter expressions indicate the union with Christ which is symbolised and sealed by baptism just as surely as does “buried together”. But it is only too apparent that they do not bear any analogy to immersion. Even if it should be conceded that the different shades of
meaning possible in the case of “planted together” (σουφυρνοι) leave room for some resemblance to immersion, yet no resemblance can obtain in the case of “crucified together”. We are represented as having been hung on the cross together with Christ, and that phase of union with Christ is represented by our baptism into Christ not one whit less than our death in him and our burial with him, not one whit less than our being planted with him in the likeness of his death and our being raised with him in the power of his resurrection. When all of Paul’s expressions are taken into account we see that burial with Christ can be appealed to as providing an index to the mode of baptism no more than can crucifixion with him. And since the latter does not indicate the mode of baptism there is no validity to the argument that burial does. The fact is that there are many aspects to our union with Christ. It is arbitrary to select one aspect and find in the language used to set it forth the essence of the mode of baptism. Such procedure is indefensible unless it can be carried through consistently. It cannot be carried through consistently here and therefore it is arbitrary and invalid. This passage as a whole points up the arbitrariness of such procedure by emphasising a phase of our union with Christ that bears no analogy whatsoever to that of immersion.

Confirmatory of this conclusion is Galatians 3:27. Here another implication of our union with Christ is argued by the apostle. The form of statement is closely similar to that of Romans 6:3. In Romans 6:3 Paul says: “As many as were baptised into Christ were baptised into his death”, and in Galatians 3:27: “For as many as were baptised into Christ did put on Christ”. It would be just as legitimate to insist that there is reference to the mode of baptism in Galatians 3:27 as in Romans 6:3. But in Galatians 3:27 the figure used by the apostle to set forth the import of baptism into Christ has no resemblance to immersion. It is the figure of putting on a garment. The plain inference is that Paul is not alluding to the mode of baptism at all. And neither may we suppose that he is in Romans 6:2–6. We should be faced with contradictory testimony as to the mode of baptism if we supposed that these passages allude to it.
In I Corinthians 12:13 we have the same effect. "For by one Spirit have we all been baptised into one body." The figure here is the making up of one unified organism and is quite foreign to the notion of immersion.

The only sane conclusion is that in none of these cases is reference made to the mode of baptism. The emphasis is plainly upon the meaning of baptism into Christ, that is to say, of union with him. Indeed, so paramount is the thought of union with Christ that the allusion to the rite of baptism need not be considered as overt. While it might not be proper to say that allusion to the rite of baptism is not at all present in the use of the word "baptise" in these passages, yet in such expressions as "baptised into Christ", "baptised into his death" (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27), and "baptised into one body" (I Cor. 12:13), it is not the rite of baptism that is in the foreground but rather the idea of union with Christ. "Being baptised into" is a way of expressing "union with". To be "baptised into Moses" (I Cor. 10:2) is to be bound to Moses in the fellowship of that covenant of which Moses was the mediator. In a word, it is to be a disciple of Moses. Paul protests to the Corinthians that they were not baptised "into the name of Paul" (I Cor. 1:13): it would have meant that

19 James Bannerman does not sufficiently take into account the data provided by the passages concerned when, with reference to Romans 6:3–5, he says: "There are two things which seem plainly enough to be included in this remarkable statement. In the first place, the immersion in water of the persons of those who are baptized is set forth as their burial with Christ in His grave because of sin; and their being raised again out of the water is their resurrection with Christ in His rising again from the dead because of their justification... And in the second place, their burial in water, when dying with Christ, was the washing away of the corruptness of the old man beneath the water; and their coming forth from the water in the image of His resurrection was their leaving behind them the old man with his sins, and emerging into newness of life. Their immersion beneath the water, and their emerging again, were the putting off the corruption of nature and rising again into holiness, or their sanctification" (op. cit., pp. 47 f.). Many commentators have found in Romans 6:4 an allusion to immersion. But see for the contrary: Edward Beecher: op. cit., pp. 86 ff.; Moses Stuart: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (Andover, 1835), pp. 272 ff.; Charles Hodge: Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (Philadelphia, 1864), p. 305; Robert Wilson: op. cit., pp. 286 ff.
they had been baptised into the discipleship of Paul rather than into that of Jesus. To be “baptised into Christ” is to be bound to him in the bonds of that union that makes us the beneficiaries of all the blessings of redemption and pledges us to his Lordship. The rite of baptism is the sign and seal of this union. But the language of the symbol and seal becomes so closely attached to that which the symbol represents that this language may be used to express that truth when the symbol itself has receded into the background of thought. Hence in these passages which have been considered it is not the rite of baptism that is in the foreground. Indeed, reference to the rite may have receded almost to the point of disappearance. It is union with Christ that claims the thought, and the language of baptism has been appropriated to give emphasis to that thought as well as to express the fulness and richness of the union involved.

*General Conclusion.* We have seen that the two pillars of the Baptist argument for the necessity of immersion, when examined in the light of the evidence provided by the Scriptures themselves, do not rest upon solid foundations. The usage in respect of βαπτίζω and its cognates does not show that these terms imply immersion. There are very few instances where it can be shown that they refer to immersion, and there are many instances where it can be shown that they refer to actions performed by other modes than that of immersion. βαπτίζω, therefore, does not mean to immerse. The collateral Baptist argument drawn from similitude to the burial and resurrection of Christ has been shown to rest upon an arbitrary selection of one or two texts, and the invalidity of this selection is demonstrated by the very passage which appears to give strongest support to the contention. βαπτίζω, we must conclude, is one of those words which indicate a certain effect without itself expressing or prescribing the particular mode by which this effect is secured.

20 Even Calvin falls into the mistake of saying that “the very word baptize...signifies to immerse” (Inst. IV, xv, 19), though he argues in the same context that it is of no importance whether a person be wholly immersed or whether water be only poured or sprinkled.
CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

III

The Church

Baptism is an ordinance instituted by Christ and is the sign and seal of union with him. This is just saying that it is the sign and seal of membership in that body of which Christ is the Head. The body of which Christ is the Head is the church (cf. Eph. 5:23–30). Hence baptism is the sign and seal of membership in the church. What then is the church?

The Church as Invisible

As has just been indicated, the church is the body of Christ. If so, it is comprised of those who are sanctified and cleansed by the washing of water by the Word, the company of the regenerate, the communion of the saints, the congregation of the faithful, those called effectually into the fellowship of Christ. The church is therefore circumscribed by the facts of regeneration and faith, facts which in themselves are spiritual and invisible. For this reason no man or organisation of men is able infallibly to determine who are regenerate and who are not, who are true believers and who are not. No man or organisation of human composition, therefore, is able to define the precise limits of the church in any one place or generation. The Lord knows them that are His and He alone perfectly and infallibly. Again, when we think of the innumerable company of those who, in all past ages of this world’s history, have been called effectually by God’s grace and translated from the power of darkness into the fellowship of God, we see even more clearly how impossible it is for man to measure the proportions or limits of the people of God. And, finally, when we contemplate the whole body of God’s elect in all ages on to the consummation of the world we see most clearly that only God can comprehend such a body of redeemed and sanctified persons. For these reasons, if for no others, we must recognise that there is an aspect of invisibility that attaches to the concept of the church.\footnote{In order to avoid the misconstructions and misconceptions frequently associated with the distinction between the church visible and invisible it is}
It is to be admitted that such an attribute is not expressly predicated of the church in Scripture. It must also be used with great care and with the requisite qualifications. We may not properly speak of two churches, one visible and the other invisible. What Scripture designates as "the church" is never regarded as something wholly invisible. But since a distinction must be drawn between that which is visible to and observable by men, on the one hand, and that which is fully and perfectly perceptible to God alone, on the other, there is an attribute of invisibility which must be recognised as belonging to the church. To be quite concrete, our Lord himself did distinguish between those who might be disciples of his and yet not truly disciples (ἀληθῶς μαθηταί, John 8:31) and between those who were in him by profession and external connection and yet not vitally and permanently (John 15). Our approach to this question of the church must take account of the fact that every one who has a place in the organisation which is visible and known to men is not by that mere token necessarily united to Christ by regeneration and faith. It is this distinction between that what is visible to men and what is known and viewed only perfectly by God that is guarded by saying that there is to the church an aspect of invisibility. We cannot think properly of the church unless we recognise that the church is constituted by a relation to Christ which in itself is spiritual and invisible and that nothing observable by men can be the absolute and final criterion of that relation. The Lord knows them that are His.

more proper to speak of the church as invisible and the church as visible or of the aspects of invisibility and visibility attaching to the church rather than of the visible church and the invisible church. The terms visible and invisible are aspects from which the church may be viewed. James Bannerman states this well: "When we speak of the Church invisible and the Church visible, we are not to be understood as if we referred in these designations to two separate and distinct Churches, but rather to the same Church under two different characters. We do not assert that Christ has founded two Churches on earth, but only one; and we affirm that that one Church is to be regarded under two distinct aspects" (op. cit., Vol. I, p. 29). But Bannerman does not appear to carry out this emphasis consistently in his subsequent discussion. He proceeds to define the visible church and the invisible respectively in terms of distinctions which do not appear to be borne out by the usage of Scripture itself.

22 Cf. Calvin: Inst. IV, i, 2.
The Church as Visible

While the church in its strict and proper signification is the company or body of those united to Christ in the spiritual bonds of effectual calling and saving faith and is therefore known only to God who alone infallibly discerns as well as determines who His people are, yet it must not be thought that the church, as Scripture knows it, is ever an invisible entity. The church may not be defined as an entity wholly invisible to human perception and observation. The church is the company or society or assembly or congregation or communion of the faithful. This concept has a variety of applications. It may refer to a company or congregation of believers in one house (cf. Rom. 16:5; I Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Phm. 2). It may refer to the company of believers in one city (cf. Acts 8:1; 11:22, 26; 13:1; 14:27; 15:22; 18:22; 20:17; Rom. 16:1).\(^2\) It may refer to the company of believers in a province (cf. Acts 9:31). Very frequently the word is used in the plural to designate the plurality of churches, that is to say of units, scattered throughout a certain area of lesser or greater geographical proportions (cf. Acts 14:23; 15:41; I Cor. 16:1, 19; II Cor. 8:1; Gal. 1:2, 22; I. Thess. 2:14), or scattered throughout the whole world (cf. Rom. 16:4, 16; I Cor. 7:17; 11:16; 14:33, 34; II Cor. 8:18; 11:28; II Thess. 1:4). Sometimes it is used in the singular, not in the sense of a particular company of believers in one place, but in a generic sense to designate the people of God in their unity and totality (I Cor. 10:32; 12:28; 15:9; Gal. 1:13; Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32; Col. 1:18, 24). This last feature of New Testament usage provides us with the concept of the church catholic or universal. A thorough study of this usage would evince that there are several aspects from which the church catholic, or the church considered generically, may be viewed. It would be going too far afield to undertake such a study now. But a brief examination of the passages cited above from Paul's

\(^2\) Cf. James Bannerman: *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 13 f. for a treatment of the data which show that the church in Jerusalem, for example, did not apply "to a single congregation of believers, but to a plurality of congregations, connected together as one body or Church by means of a common government".
epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians will show how expansive and inclusive the word “church” is in such connections.

What needs to be particularly observed in connection with the New Testament is that whether the church is viewed as the unit or company of believers in a home or town or city, or whether it is viewed as the broader communion of the saints scattered throughout a province, or the whole company of believers scattered throughout the world, it is always a visible observable entity. Union with Christ and the faith through which that union is effected, though in themselves invisible and spiritual facts, are nevertheless realities which find expression in what is observable. Faith always receives registration in word and action. This is just saying that those united to Christ form the communion of the saints and the congregation of the faithful. And what is even more relevant and important is that by the appointment and prescription of Christ as the Head of the church there is the institution which by its very nature as an institution of Christ in the world is a visible and observable entity. The people of God do come together and associate with one another for purposes of collective testimony and worship, for the administration of divinely instituted ordinances, for mutual edification, and for the exercise of divinely instituted government and discipline. The very constitutive idea of the church, namely, union with Christ and the union of believers with one another in the body of Christ, as an idea realised in the history of this world, necessarily involves visible union and communion. We cannot think of the church invisible as anything that exists in abstraction or apart from the overt expression which the spiritual and invisible facts of union and communion with Christ demand. Hence visible association and organisation are implicit in the very nature of what constitutes the church. Such organisation is effected by the efficacious and continuous working of the Head of the church through his Word and Spirit, and human agency and responsibility which are exercised in pursuance of Christ’s institution bear the seal of his authorisation and command. All of this is implied in our Lord’s word, “Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). In a word, the
church is Christ's church. It is established and preserved by him, and its continuance as an entity to be administered in accordance with his institution is guaranteed by the fact that he is Head over all things to his body the church.

As was indicated above, human agency and responsibility are operative in the church. One of the ways in which this agency is exercised is the administration which is committed to men. There is government and discipline in Christ's church and such are administered by men, in accordance with Christ's appointment. The question arises at this point: how does this administration on the part of men relate itself to those spiritual and invisible facts by which the church is constituted? Men are not omniscient, and they are fallible. What is the prerogative of fallible men in reference to this all-important phase of the administration exercised by them, namely, the inclusion of members in, and exclusion from, the visible church? In other words, what are the criteria by which men are to judge in the exercise of this responsibility which is committed to them? The church is not a haphazard assemblage or organisation. It is the communion of the saints and has specific character determined by the specific character of those constituting it and by the specific purposes for which they are associated together. It is not a voluntary society in the sense that the members and officers may by their own prerogative or discretion devise the terms and conditions of association. These terms are prescribed by the Head of the church: the church is the institute of Christ.

What we find in the New Testament is that the constituting bond of communion was common faith in Christ and that the condition of admission to the fellowship was this same common faith (cf. Acts 2:38-42; 8:13, 35-38; 10:34-38; 16:14, 15, 31-33). This faith, however, did not have any automatic way of evidencing itself and, consequently, could become effective in gaining admission to the fellowship of the saints only by confession or profession. This means that faith was registered by confession, and the criterion by which the church exercised its administrative responsibility in the admission of members was confession. In its essence this confession was that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and that he was Lord. Such a confession had far-reaching implications for faith and con-
duct even within the sphere of human judgment. Mere lip confession, contradicted by other evidence either in the realm of faith or conduct, could not be accepted for entrance into or continuance in the fellowship of the saints. We may, therefore, define the confession as an intelligent and consistent profession of faith in Christ and of obedience to him. It is obvious that such confession falls within the orbit in which human discrimination and judgment may be exercised. It is not the prerogative of man to search the heart of another. But it is the prerogative of man to judge in reference to public confession or profession. This, therefore, is the criterion in accord with which human administration is exercised. And what needs to be emphasised here is that this is so by divine institution. It is not the expedient of proven experience. And it is not simply a necessity arising from the limitations inherent in human nature. It is by divine institution that the church, as a visible entity administered by men in accordance with Christ's appointment, must admit to its fellowship those who make a credible profession of faith in Christ and promise of obedience to him. To exclude such is to arrogate to ourselves prerogatives which do not belong to us and it is to violate the institution of Christ.

This profession, though it is a profession that only a true believer can honestly and truly make, is, nevertheless, of such a nature that those who do not have true faith may make it to the satisfaction of those responsible for that administration whereby admission is secured into the fellowship of the church (cf. Acts 8:13, 20–23). We are here faced with the anomaly that the visible entity which is called the church may comprise within its membership those who do not really and truly belong to the body of Christ. Even when human vigilance is exercised to the fullest extent of its prerogative, people may be admitted to the church, and necessarily admitted as far as human administration is concerned, who do not really belong to the church of Christ. This is an anomaly which must be fully appreciated and we must not make attempts to eliminate it. There are two dangers we must avoid and into which we are too liable to fall.24

24 For a history of thought and debate on this question in New England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, centering particularly around what has been called the Half-Way Covenant, cf. Williston Walker: The
The first danger is to construe the confession as not a confession of true and saving faith but simply of intellectual and historical faith. In this way it might appear that the dis-


25 The position developed in the pages which follow is that of the Reformed Churches in their representative and classic expressions. It is set forth, for example, in the Westminster Standards. The Westminster Confession says: “Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and His benefits, and to confirm our interest in Him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word” (Chapter XXVII, Section 1). And the Larger Catechism even more explicitly says: “A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ in his church, to signify, seal, and exhibit unto those that are within the covenant of grace, the benefits of his mediation; to strengthen and increase their faith, and all other graces; to oblige them to obedience; to testify and cherish their love and communion one with another; and to distinguish them from those that are without” (Question 162). With reference to baptism the Confession says: “Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life” (Chapter XXVIII, Section 1). And the Larger Catechism: “Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein Christ hath ordained the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, to be a sign and seal of ingrafting into himself, of remission of sins by his blood, and regeneration by his Spirit; of adoption, and resurrection unto everlasting life; and whereby the parties baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church, and enter into open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord’s” (Question 165). Cf. the Shorter Catechism, Questions 92 and 94.

William Cunningham with his usual thoroughness and erudition has dealt with this question and has set forth the classic Reformed position in distinction from the Lutheran position and also in distinction from deformations and aberrations that have crept into Churches professing the Reformed confession (see the essay, “Zwingle and the Doctrine of the Sacraments” in The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation, 1866, pp. 262–291). Of particular interest is the quotation from Martin Vitringa in which we have a summary of the doctrine of the Reformed Churches on this point (ibid., pp. 264 ff.). The quotations also from Samuel Rutherford, George Gillespie, Thomas Boston, and John Erskine are most pertinent and instructive. See also Charles Hodge: Systematic Theology (New York, 1873), Vol. III, pp. 562 ff.
crepancy between the fact that the church consists of those who are members of the body of Christ and the fact that many may be admitted into the fellowship of the visible church who are not truly members of the body of Christ is removed. It is a false solution. There is no warrant whatsoever for supposing that the confession which we find in the New Testament, by which members were admitted into the fellowship of the church, was a profession of mere intellectual or historical belief. It was the confession of like nature with that which Peter made at Caesarea Philippi, a confession which elicited from our Lord the benediction, “Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 16:17). It is most instructive in this regard that the confession of Peter provided the occasion for the most significant disclosure made by our Lord respecting the church: “Upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). However we may interpret the word “rock” in this utterance there can be no question but that the church confession is the kind of confession made by Peter. And this means that the confession requisite for membership in the church is the confession of Jesus as the Christ, as the Son of God, as Saviour, and as Lord. It is a profession of true and saving faith.

It is not by any means the prerogative of those who administer the government and discipline of the church to determine whether the profession made is a true and sincere profession of such faith. A judgment of this kind would exceed the warrant of men. But it is the prerogative and duty of those who rule in the church of God to make plain, both in the instruction and examination of candidates for admission, what the meaning of the profession is and to insist that only the regenerate, only those united to Christ by faith, can truly make the profession required. There is thus the fullest scope for the examination of candidates in ascertaining the intelligence and consistency of the profession made, in instructing candidates respecting the nature of the Christian confession, in dissuading those who do not have true faith from making the profession which they cannot sincerely and honestly make, and in maintaining the purity of the church against the entrance of the ignorant and profane. But this examination, it
must be remembered, is not conducted on the premise that to the officers of the church or to the church as a communion is given the prerogative to determine who are regenerate and who are not. It is conducted, rather, on the basis that to the ministry of the church belongs the obligation to insure as far as possible by instruction and warning that only those united to Christ will make the confession which only such can truly make. It is the function of the church to demand an intelligent, credible, and uncontradicted confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

The second danger that must be avoided is the tendency to define the church in such a way as would seem to eliminate or at least tone down the discrepancy or anomaly with which we are dealing. This again is a mistake. Our definition of the church must not be framed in terms of an accommodation by which we make provision, within our definition, for the inclusion of hypocrites, that is to say, of those who profess to be Christ’s but are not really his. Our definition of the church must be framed in terms of the constitutive principle, to wit, that the church consists of those who are united to Christ and are members of his body. It is the communion of saints. And it is precisely that body of believers in fellowship with Christ and with one another, associated together in the world in accordance with Christ’s institution, which is called in the New Testament “the church” and is what we often call the visible church. We may not abandon this constitutive principle, we may not accommodate our definition in order to make allowance for the fact that some make the profession who do not have the faith and who enter into the fellowship without the bond that constitutes it.\(^{26}\)

\(^{26}\) It is very easy to fall into this kind of accommodation when we begin to apply the distinction between the church as invisible and the church as visible. And, indeed, it may appear to be necessary in order to avoid other pitfalls, especially the pitfall of the Romish doctrine of the church. In the esteem of the present writer this appears rather conspicuously in James Bannerman’s excellent work, The Church of Christ. His definition of the visible church is framed in terms that do not appear to be supported by New Testament usage (cf. op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 29 ff.). The terms in which Bannerman develops the distinction between visible and invisible and frames his definition of the visible church seem to provide us with a very simple and effective polemic against Rome. The controversy with Rome
Perhaps no passage evinces this more clearly than Paul's salutation to the church at Corinth in his first epistle: "Paul called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, to them who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all those who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours" (I Cor. 1:1, 2). However we may construe the precise syntactic relation which the expression, "the church of God which is at Corinth", sustains to the two clauses which immediately follow, it would be exegetical violence to think that the church of God at Corinth may be construed in other terms than the "sanctified in Christ Jesus" and the "called to be saints", as also those at Corinth who "call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ". In other words, this provides us with Paul's concept of the church at Corinth, namely, those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints, and he does not conceive of the church in broader terms so as to distinguish between the church and those sanctified and called. In this epistle this is all the more illumining because in chapter 5 he proceeds to deal with those who had made the Christian profession and who were in the fellowship of the church but who by reason of gross sin were to be excluded from its communion. In dealing with the incestuous person he demands the delivering of "such a person unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh" and adds, "Know ye not that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened" (vss. 6, 7). He continues the subject of discipline and says, "If any one that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or a thief; with such an one no not to eat" (vs. 11). Paul recognises that people bearing the Christian name and therefore admitted to the fellowship of the church might be proven to be or turn out to be profane persons having no inheritance in the kingdom of God (cf. 6:9, 10). He commands that such

must, of course, be unabated, but it does not appear to be sound to conduct this controversy on the basis of a definition which does not find its counterpart in the Biblical usage with reference to the church.
be put outside the fellowship of the church (cf. 5:13). He recognised the facts which arose from the sinfulness and infirmity of fallen human nature. But the instructive feature of this epistle is that when Paul addressed the church and conceived of it he did not construe the church at Corinth in such terms as would allow for the inclusion, in what he defines as the church, of those persons who might have borne the Christian name and been admitted to the communion of the saints but who were not sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints. Paul recognised that there was old leaven in the church at Corinth, leaven which needed to be purged out. But when he addresses the church he does not address it as a community to be defined in terms of old leaven and new unleavened bread. He does not define the church in terms which would make allowance for both elements. No, he addresses the church as those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, and who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Other salutations of Paul are to the same effect. I Thessalonians 1:1 and II Thessalonians 1:1 are particularly relevant. He salutes the church at Thessalonica as “the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (I Thess. 1:1; cf. Rom. 1:7; II Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2).

It is true that hypocrites may secure admission to the church. As we have seen, the very administration which Christ has instituted for the admission of members allows for that. There are disciples who are not truly disciples, and there are branches in the vine which are not vitally and abidingly in the vine. But while we fully recognise this fact we must at the same time distinguish between the constitutive principle in terms of which the church is defined, on the one hand, and the *de facto* situation arising from the way in which Christ has chosen to administer the affairs of his church in the world, on the other. The inclusion and exclusion are in the hands of fallible men. This administration is of divine institution. Hence those who are not Christ’s gain admission.\(^{27}\) Here is

\(^{27}\) Cf. Calvin: *Inst. IV*, i, 7 and 8.

In refraining from the attempt to define the church in terms of an accommodation that will make allowance for the inclusion of hypocrites we are
the anomaly. We have to recognise and contain it. It persists in its sharpness because we refuse to define the church in lower terms than the body of Christ and the communion of the saints. It is that definition that creates the anomaly and we may not revise the definition in order to relieve the tension. For the anomaly in this case is just one way in which the discrepancy between God’s secret and infallible operations, on the one hand, and the way by which He has pleased to administer the means of grace in the world, on the other, appears. This discrepancy manifests itself in other connections. And we must not attempt to remove the discrepancy by eliminating or modifying the truths which create it. In this case it means that we must continue to define the church as the body of Christ, the congregatio fidelium, the communio sanctorum.

Baptism is the sign and seal of membership in the church. It is administered, therefore, to those who make the requisite confession of faith in Jesus. According to our Lord’s institution in the great commission baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is an integral part of the process of discipling the nations and is therefore an essential mark of discipleship. Baptism is not an addendum to discipleship but that by which discipleship is consummated. And discipleship comes to fruition and receives its vindication in the observance of all things which Jesus has commanded. In the terms of the great commission the church consists of those who are disciples. Since discipleship is not consummated without baptism we must regard baptism as an indispensable mark of the church. The person who refuses baptism and declines the reproach of Christ, which it entails, cannot be received as a member of Christ’s body. And the organisation which discards baptism and thereby evinces its rejection of the authority and Lordship of Christ cannot be accounted a branch of the Christian church.

following the same lines as would have to be followed in defining the kingdom of God. We are not forgetful of the parables of the tares and the wheat and of the drag net. There is a mixture in the kingdom, and Christ will at the end gather out of his kingdom all things that offend and them which do iniquity. But we may not define the kingdom of God in terms of accommodation to this de facto situation. We must define it in terms of the rule and realm of righteousness, life, and peace.
The Church Generically One

It is necessary to distinguish between the form of the visible church under the Old Testament and its form under the New. Such a distinction is implied in the words of our Lord to Peter: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Jesus was referring to the new form which the church was to assume in consequence of his own messianic work. He calls it "my church". Full allowance must be made for the new form of structure and administration established by the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Nevertheless the distinction does not warrant the denial of the existence of the church under the Old Testament, nor of the generic unity and continuity of the church in both dispensations. In addition to the fact that the organisation of the people of God in the Old Testament is expressly called the church (Acts 7:38), we must bear in mind that the church in the New Testament is founded upon the covenant made with Abraham. The specific covenant administration under which the New Testament church operates is the extension and unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant. This is distinctly the argument of the apostle Paul in the epistle to the Galatians when he says, "they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham" and that the "covenant, confirmed beforehand by God, the law which was four hundred and thirty years afterward does not make void, so as to make the promise of no effect" (Gal. 3:9, 17). It is the blessing of Abraham, a blessing secured to him by the covenant administered to him, that comes upon the Gentiles through Christ (Gal. 3:14). The church as it exists in the respective dispensations is not two organisms. It is likened to one tree with many branches, all of which grow from one root and stock and form one organic life (Rom. 11:16–21). Paul again reminds us that while the Gentiles were at one time "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise", yet now in Christ Jesus they are "no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God, being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the
chief corner stone" (Eph. 2:12, 19, 20). There is generic unity, continuity, and identity. Only within this generic unity may the specific distinctions be recognised and applied. It is putting the matter mildly when we say that there are principles, common to both dispensations, which are operative in, and must be recognised as applying to, the distinct forms which the church assumed in the respective dispensations. Perhaps no other datum is more relevant and conclusive to establish the unity and continuity of the church in both economies than the fact that the New Testament is the expansion and unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant, that all nations are blessed in terms of the promise given to Abraham, "In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:3), that Abraham is the father of the faithful, and that New Testament believers of all nations are Abraham's seed and heirs according to promise. It is this basic and underlying unity of the covenant of grace and of promise that establishes the generic unity and continuity of the church. In terms of covenant union and communion the church is but the covenant people of God in all ages and among all nations. The promise which epitomises the unity, and which summarises the constitutive principle, of the church is, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people". This is the promise of grace upon which rests the communion of the people of God in all ages. It applies to the New Testament as well as to the Old and to the Old no less than to the New. It is also the bond that unites them inseparably together.

(to be concluded)
CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

SECOND ARTICLE

JOHN MURRAY

IV

INFANT BAPTISM

If it is proper to administer baptism to infants, then the import of baptism must be the same for infants as for adults. It cannot have one meaning for infants and another for adults. Baptism is the sign and seal of membership in Christ's body, the church. If the baptism of infants is of divine institution, baptism must be for them, no less than for adults, the sign and seal of union with Christ in the virtue of his death and the power of his resurrection. As we proceed to set forth the argument in support of infant baptism it is necessary to bear in mind all that has been said already respecting the nature of the church, particularly the tenet that the church is generically one in both dispensations. The basic premise of the argument for infant baptism is that the New Testament economy is the unfolding and fulfilment of the covenant made with Abraham and that the necessary implication is the unity and continuity of the church.

The Inclusion of Infants

It is a fact beyond dispute that the covenant made with Abraham included the infant offspring of Abraham. This is just saying that the church under the Old Testament included not only all who were of sufficient age and intelligence to confess the true religion but also their infant seed. Infants received the sign of circumcision. It was administered to them by divine command (Gen. 17:10–12). And circumcision was the sign and seal of the covenant administered to Abraham.
With reference to circumcision it must be fully appreciated that it was not essentially or primarily the sign of family, racial, or national identity. Any significance which circumcision possessed along the line of national identity or privilege was secondary and derived. Its primary and essential significance was that it was the sign and seal of the highest and richest spiritual blessing which God bestows upon men. This is apparent from the following considerations.

1. In Genesis 17:1–14 we have what is probably the fullest account of the covenant made with Abraham. It is, in any case, basic and it clearly establishes the most relevant principles. The covenant made with Abraham is that in terms of which he received the promise that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed. It is in terms of this covenant that he is the father of all the faithful. It is this covenant that is unfolded in the New Testament and it is in terms of this covenant that the blessing of Abraham comes upon the Gentiles. That circumcision is the sign of this covenant in the highest reaches of its meaning and in its deepest spiritual significance is demonstrated by the fact that circumcision is called the covenant. “This is my covenant which ye shall keep, between me and you, and thy seed after thee: every male among you shall be circumcised” (vs. 10). “And my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant” (vs. 13). “And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised . . . shall be cut off from among his people: he hath broken my covenant” (vs. 14). Stephen reflects the proper perception of this association when he says, “And he gave him the covenant of circumcision” (Acts 7:8). This mode of statement in Genesis 17 and in Stephen’s speech demonstrates that circumcision was the seal of the covenant in its deepest spiritual significance. And we have no authority whatsoever to say that circumcision was simply the sign of an external relationship or of merely racial and national identity. It is indeed true that the spiritual blessing of the covenant made with Abraham carried with it external privileges and it marked off the chosen people as a distinct national and racial entity (cf. Gen. 12:2; 46:3; Deut. 4:7, 8, 34; I Chron. 17:21, 22). But these external blessings and national privileges accrued from the spiritual blessing which the covenant
embodied and imparted. In like manner circumcision, as the sign and seal of the covenant, carried with it these external blessings and national privileges. It was inevitable that circumcision should have been associated with these national advantages that were derived from the blessing involved in and conveyed by the covenant. But it is a grave mistake to think of circumcision as the sign and seal of merely external blessings and privileges. Circumcision is the sign and seal of the covenant itself in its deepest and richest significance, and it is the sign of external privileges only as these are the fruits of the spiritual blessing which it signifies. It is then the sign of external blessing no more than is the covenant a covenant of external blessing. The covenant embraces external blessing but it does so only insofar as the internal blessing results in external manifestation. The covenant itself may not be identified with such manifestations. Neither may circumcision.

What was the Abrahamic covenant in the highest reaches of its meaning? Undeniably and simply: “I will be your God, and ye shall be my people” (cf. Gen. 17:7; Exod. 19:5, 6; Deut. 7:6; 14:2; Jer. 31:33). In a word it is union and communion with Jehovah, the God of Israel. It was this blessing circumcision signified and sealed.

2. The foregoing conclusions drawn from the study of Genesis 17:1–14 may also be elicited from the meaning attached to circumcision in other passages and contexts. Such passages as Exodus 6:12, 30; Leviticus 19:23; 26:41; Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; 6:10; 9:25 will show that circumcision carries the import of the removal of defilement. It means therefore the removal of that defilement with which even infants are afflicted and with which they enter this world. As symbolic of such defilement and its removal we readily see how it could have become the fitting sign of the covenant that secured union and communion with Jehovah. It signified and sealed that cleansing which fitted for the presence of Jehovah and so was the seal of union and communion.

3. Paul distinctly says that circumcision was the seal of the righteousness of the faith Abraham had while he was uncircumcised (Rom. 4:11; Col. 2:11, 12; Rom. 2:25–29; Phil. 3:3). It is therefore the seal of the righteousness of faith.
And this is just saying that it is the seal of justification by faith. How closely related this is to the more comprehensive notion of union and communion with God need not be argued. These three notions — union and communion with God, the removal of defilement, and the righteousness of faith — are, obviously, not antithetical. They are mutually complementary, and, taken together, they indicate the deep soterian richness of the blessing that circumcision signifies and seals. It is no peripheral or external blessing that circumcision portrays any more than is it a peripheral blessing that the covenant imparts.

We cannot but recognise the close similarity that there is between these three elements of the import of circumcision and the three elements of the import of baptism which we discovered earlier in our discussion. Of particular note is the fact that the leading notion in the meaning of circumcision is identical in principle with the leading notion in the meaning of baptism, namely, union and communion with the Lord. And it is of paramount importance to take due account of the fact that it was by divine institution and command that the sign and seal of such blessing was administered to infants in the old economy. Circumcision, signifying what in principle is identical with that signified by baptism, was administered to infants who were born within the covenant relation and privilege.

*The Continuance of this Privilege*

The gospel dispensation is the unfolding of the covenant made with Abraham, the extension and enlargement of the blessing conveyed by this covenant to the people of the Old Testament period. Abraham is the father of all the faithful. They who are of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham. We come now to the question which cannot be suppressed or evaded and which cannot be pressed with too much emphasis. If children born of the faithful were given the sign and seal of the covenant and therefore of the richest blessing which the covenant disclosed, if the New Testament economy is the elaboration and extension of this covenant of which circumcision was the sign, are we to believe that infants in
this age are excluded from that which was provided by the Abrahamic covenant? In other words, are we to believe that infants now may not properly be given the sign of that blessing which is enshrined in the new covenant? Is the new covenant in this respect less generous than was the Abrahamic? Is there less efficacy, as far as infants are concerned, in the new covenant than there was in the old? Are infants in the new dispensation more *inhabile* to the grace of God? These are questions that cannot be lightly dismissed. And they are particularly pertinent and cogent when we remember that baptism, which is the sign of the covenant under the new economy as circumcision was under the old, bears essentially the same import as did circumcision. Baptism does not signify any higher kind of divine blessing than did circumcision. It may indicate more fully what the blessing is and how it is to be attained. But it does not signify any greater blessing. Shall we then say that baptism may not be administered to infants?

If infants are excluded now, it cannot be too strongly emphasised that this change implies a complete reversal of the earlier divinely instituted practice. So we must ask: do we find any hint or intimation of such reversal in either the Old or the New Testament? More pointedly, does the New Testament revoke or does it provide any intimation of revoking so expressively authorised a principle as that of the inclusion of infants in the covenant and their participation in the covenant sign and seal? This practice had been followed, by divine authority, in the administration of the covenant of grace for some two thousand years. Has it been discontinued? Our answer to these questions must be that we find

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28 Again the statement of Calvin is worth quoting: "The covenant is common, the reason for confirming it is common. Only the mode of confirmation is different; for to them it was confirmed by circumcision, which among us is succeeded by baptism. Otherwise, if the testimony by which the Jews were confirmed concerning the salvation of their seed be taken away from us, by the advent of Christ it has come to pass that the grace of God is more obscure and less attested to us than it was to the Jews. If this cannot be affirmed without the greatest dishonour to Christ... we must confess that at least it ought not to be more concealed nor less attested than under the obscure shadows of the law" (Inst. IV, xvi, 6).
no evidence of revocation. In view of the fact that the new covenant is based upon and is the unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant, in view of the basic identity of meaning attaching to circumcision and baptism, in view of the unity and continuity of the covenant grace administered in both dispensations, we can affirm with confidence that evidence of revocation or repeal is mandatory if the practice or principle has been discontinued under the New Testament.

In the absence of such evidence of repeal we conclude that the administering of the sign and seal of the covenant to the infant seed of believers is still in operation and has perpetual divine warrant. In other words, the command to administer the sign to infants has not been revoked: therefore it is still in force. The situation is that instead of requiring an express statute authorising the administration of baptism to infants we find, rather, that an express statute of this nature would be superfluous and therefore not necessary to the propriety and authority of this ordinance.

Again, the case is not simply that we possess no evidence of repeal of this divinely instituted practice in the administration of God's grace in the world. In addition we have some positive evidence in favour of its continuance, not in the form of an express statute, for in that case there would be no dispute, but in the form of data which cannot be properly assessed unless we regard the principle which underlies circumcision as still valid and in operation under the New Testament. With that evidence we shall deal later.

Finally, we cannot believe that the New Testament economy is less beneficent than was the Old. It is rather the case that the New Testament gives more abundant scope to the blessing of God's covenant. We are not therefore led to expect retraction; we are led to expect expansion and extension. It would not accord with the genius of the new economy to suppose that there is the abrogation of so cardinal a method of disclosing and applying the grace which lies at the heart of God's covenant administration.

The Significance of Infant Baptism

Though circumcision and baptism are the signs and seals of covenant union and communion, it does not follow that every one who bears this sign and seal is an actual partaker of the grace signified and sealed and is therefore an heir of eternal life. It frequently happens that the sign is administered to those who, from the standpoint of good government and discipline, ought not to be baptised. The church too often fails to maintain the proper oversight and discrimination in this matter as in all others. But apart from the question of looseness and carelessness in administering this rite, it does not even follow that all those who, from the viewpoint of administration, properly bear the sign and seal are possessors of the actual grace signified. That is to say, even when the church exercises the proper oversight and discipline, even when all the safeguards of divine institution are applied, it does not follow that the administration of this rite insures for the recipient the possession of the grace signified. It must be admitted that this appears very anomalous, and it presents us with great difficulty. There have been many attempts made to resolve the difficulty.

It should be remembered that this anomaly does not concern infant baptism alone: it is a difficulty that inheres in the question of the baptism of adults as well. Antipaedobaptists must not think that they enjoy any immunity from this question, although they may sometimes naively consider that it is the exclusive problem of paedobaptists. It is a question that concerns the import of the sacraments as such. Here, however, we are concerned with this general question as it applies to infant baptism. And it is conceded that the question arises for many people most acutely in connection with the baptism of infants.

Several observations call for very distinct emphasis in connection with this question.

1. We must not seek the solution of the anomaly by saying that circumcision and baptism are signs and seals merely of external covenant privilege and blessing, that is to say, of external relationship as distinguished from the internal and spiritual blessing dispensed in and through the covenant of
grace. It cannot be too insistently stressed that circumcision was and baptism is the sign and seal of the covenant in the highest reaches and deepest significance of its soteric and spiritual meaning. In a word, they are signs and seals of the covenant of grace, not of certain external blessings accruing from or following upon the covenant of grace. And this is so even though many who bear the sign and seal do not possess and may never possess the blessings of the covenant itself.

It is not being contended that the distinction between an external covenant relationship and the internal covenant relationship is necessarily improper. This indeed may be a proper and even necessary distinction. Neither is it contended that it is improper to say that there have been and are many who have enjoyed the privileges of the external covenant relationship who are not partakers of the blessing of the covenant of grace. What is being contended for is that baptism may never properly be said to be the sign and seal of the external relationship rather than of the covenant itself in its richest and deepest blessing. There is not the slightest warrant from Scripture for the notion that baptism or, for that matter, circumcision is simply the sign and seal of external privilege.

2. The resolution of the anomaly, that there are some who, from the standpoint of administration, rightly receive the sign and seal of that which in reality they do not possess, is not to be sought along the line of the distinction between an external covenant relationship and the internal spiritual relationship but rather in the consideration that there is a discrepancy between the secret operations and purposes of God in his saving grace, on the one hand, and the divinely instituted method of administering the covenant in the world, on the other. In other words, the administration of the rite that is the sign and seal of the covenant has to be conducted not in accordance with God's secret operations and infallible purposes of grace but in accordance with certain requirements which fallible men may execute and apply. The divine method of administering the covenant in the world is that God commits to fallible men the ordinances of administration. These ordinances have to be dispensed in accordance with require-
ments which fallible men may apply. But the requirements that may be applied by men are not the measure of God’s secret and efficacious operations of grace. To be very specific, baptism is not administered by revelation of God’s secret will. It is properly administered when certain conditions of divine prescription, conditions with reference to which fallible men are in a position to judge, have been fulfilled. This is the divine institution. But God has not given us any assurance that the operations of His saving grace are invariably present where the divine institution is observed. Consequently, among adults there are some to whom the sign is administered, rightly and properly in accordance with the administration which God has committed to men, who do not possess, either in the forum of conscience or in the forum of the divine judgment, the inward grace of which baptism is the sign. Yet this discrepancy does not preclude the administering of the ordinance to them so long as they fulfil those conditions of intelligent and credible confession in reference to which men may judge. In like manner with respect to infants the sign is properly dispensed in many cases where the recipients do not possess and may never possess the inward grace signified. It may be said that such are only in external covenant relationship. But it may not be said that baptism is simply the sign and seal of such external relationship.

3. The infant seed of those who are believers by confession and profession should be baptised and thus bear the sign and seal of the covenant of grace. This is the divine institution: it is one of the ways by which it has pleased God to administer the covenant of grace in the world; it is one of the ordinances by means of which it pleases God to fulfil His covenant purposes from age to age and from generation to generation. It is this fact of divine institution that constitutes the sufficient ground for administering and receiving this ordinance. When we ask the question: why do we baptise infants or upon what ground do we dispense baptism to them? it is sufficient for us to know and to answer that it is the divine institution. God has ordained it as one of the provisions whereby He administers His grace in the world. When the church practises this institution and complies with the divine command, no further judgment respecting the secret purpose of God
nor respecting God's secret operations in the heart of those baptised is required as the proper ground upon which the ordinance is administered. To require any further information than the divine institution would go beyond the warrant of Scripture. It is true that in administering this ordinance we plead the promises which God has attached to faith and obedience, and we rest our faith and hope upon God's faithfulness. But our faith in God's promises would not appear to be placed in its proper relationship to infant baptism if it were conceived of as the ground for baptising infants. The ground is rather the institution which God has established and revealed, namely, that to the infant seed of believers the sign and seal of the covenant of grace is to be administered. Hence to aver that baptism is dispensed to infants on the ground of presumptive election or presumptive regeneration appears to be without warrant and also introduces perplexity into the question at issue.  

Underlying this divine institution is the covenant administration which God has established in the world in pursuance of His redemptive purpose. God has ordained that the infant seed of believers be included in the covenant relation, and it is because infants are included that they receive the sign and seal of the covenant. In other words, the covenant of grace and the divinely instituted method of administering it in the world are the rationale of infant baptism. But when we are thinking specifically of the ground or basis upon which we act in administering baptism to infants it would seem necessary to focus attention upon the fact that it is the divine institution for the sign of the covenant to be given to the infant seed of the godly.

The notion of presumptive election appears in the First Helvetic Confession when, with reference to the baptism of infants it says, "praesertim quam de eorum electione pie est praesumendum" (Art. XXII). Charles Hodge adopts this notion. He says: "Since the promise is not only to parents but to their seed, children are, by the command of God, to be regarded and treated as of the number of the elect, until they give undeniable evidence to the contrary, or refuse to be so considered... It is not their vital union with Christ, nor their actual regeneration by the Holy Ghost, that is presumed, but their election... This presumption of election is not founded on their baptism, but their baptism is founded on this presumption" ("The Church Membership of Infants" in The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, 1858, pp. 375 f. n; cf. also pp. 377 f.). He contends that this is the doctrine of all the Reformed Churches and also claims it is the doctrine of Calvin, quoting from Inst. IV, xvi, 5, 6 in support of his claim.

Calvin in Inst. IV, xvi, 5-11 certainly holds that infants are baptised
In the case of adults we baptise on the basis of an intelligent and credible confession, not on the basis of a judgment to the effect that the person is regenerate and not even on the basis of the judgment that the person is presumptively regenerate. This is the divine ordinance. It is the institution of God that all who make such a confession be baptised, and no further judgment may be posited as the ground of the administration. Likewise, in regard to infants, we baptise the infant seed of those who make this confession simply because God has instituted this ordinance. Short of that we must not stop. Beyond that we may not go.

This is not, of course, to say everything regarding the relations of those who are baptised to one another nor regarding because the covenant belongs to them as to the infants of the Jews under the Old Testament. Since they are partakers of the thing signified why should they not receive the sign? The covenant remains in force and includes infants. Baptism is now the mode of confirmation. “Let those, therefore, who embrace the promise of God that he will perpetuate his mercy to their offspring, consider it their duty to present them to the Church to be signed with the symbol of mercy, and thereby to animate their minds to stronger confidence, when they actually see the covenant of the Lord engraven on the bodies of their children” (Inst. IV, xvi, 9).

It is without question, therefore, that Calvin regarded the inclusion of believers’ children in the covenant as the reason for the baptism of such. To the present writer, however, this is not necessarily equivalent to the statement of Hodge that infants are baptised because they are presumptively elect or presumptively in the covenant. The reasons given by Calvin for infant baptism appear to be rather closely adhered to in the Second Helvetic Confession, Cap. XX, 6; The Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 74; The French Confession, Art. XXXV; The Belgic Confession, Art. XXXIV. The brevity of the statements in the British Confessions is rather striking. The Thirty-Nine Articles say infant baptism is to be retained “as most agreeable with the institution of Christ”; the Irish Articles that it is to be retained “as agreeable to the Word of God”; the Westminster Confession that “the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized”; the Larger Catechism that “infants descending from parents, either both, or but one of them, professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are in that respect within the covenant, and to be baptized”; the Shorter Catechism that “the infants of such as are members of the visible church are to be baptized”.


For a historical survey and analysis see Lewis Bevens Schenck: The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant (New Haven, 1940).
the attitude of the church to those baptised. Those making the requisite confession and therefore baptised are to be received as believers, as those in union and communion with Christ, and they are to be treated accordingly. Baptised infants are to be received as the children of God and treated accordingly. But the proper ground of baptism, whether it be that of adults or infants, consists in the divine institution and command which regulate the church in these elements of worship as in all others.

If we bear in mind these principles as they apply to the divine method of administering the covenant of grace in the world, we shall find ourselves in a better position to understand some of the instances which occur in Scripture and which seem at first sight to confront us with great difficulty and anomaly. These instances are specifically the circumcision of Ishmael and of Esau. Ishmael was certainly circumcised (Gen. 17:23) and we have every good reason to believe that Esau was also. How could this be? The covenant was

One of the finest statements on this subject is found in the Directory for the Public Worship of God prepared by the Westminster Assembly. Under the caption, “Of the Administration of the Sacraments” it reads: “The seed and posterity of the faithful, born within the church have, by their birth, interest in the covenant, and right to the seal of it, and to the outward privileges of the church, under the gospel, no less than the children of Abraham in the time of the Old Testament; the covenant of grace, for substance, being the same; and the grace of God, and the consolation of believers, more plentiful than before... That children, by baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers; and that all who are baptized in the name of Christ, do renounce, and by their baptism are bound to fight against the devil, the world, and the flesh: That they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptized”.

This evinces that the doctrine of the Westminster divines followed the lines of thought enunciated by Calvin and formulated in such Reformed creeds as the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, even though the statements in the other Westminster Standards are brief and do not show this so clearly.

If the word “presumptive” or its equivalent as used by the First Helvetic Confession, Charles Hodge, and B. B. Warfield, for example, simply means what the Directory, as quoted above, means, namely, that believers' children are to be received as “Christians, and federally holy”, then no exception could be taken to its use. It is not certain, however, that this is all that is implied in the use of such a notion as “presumptive election”.

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established with neither. If we think along the lines delineated above we shall see that the circumcision of Ishmael and of Esau is perfectly consonant with the divine method of administering the covenant in the world and provides us with the most instructive example of the application of this principle. The divinely prescribed principle of procedure was that all males should be circumcised, those born in the house or bought with money of any stranger (Gen. 17:12). The provisions of Genesis 17:9–14 are explicit to this effect. When these provisions are duly appreciated it will be recognised that for Abraham not to circumcise Ishmael and for Isaac not to circumcise Esau would have been a direct violation of the divine command. They were both circumcised. And they were circumcised in accordance with the principles of the divine institution as it was operative in the world. Circumcision was not withheld from them, for to withhold it from them would have been to act in accordance with other data of revelation that did not regulate and were not intended to regulate the actual administration of the ordinance of circumcision. To refrain from circumcising Ishmael and Esau would mean the importation and application of other data that did not provide the rule and that could not be interpreted as modifying the rule by which the covenant sign was to be administered. That rule was that all males should be circumcised.

It was prior to the circumcision of Ishmael that Abraham was told, "My covenant will I establish with Isaac". Rebecca knew by revelation, prior to the birth of her two sons, that Esau was to be rejected. But this information regarding the purpose of God could not properly be used either by Abraham or by Rebecca for depriving Ishmael or Esau respectively of the sign of circumcision. In accordance with the uniform principle enunciated in Genesis 17:9–14, circumcision was to be administered to all male children. In the case of Abraham we have in Genesis 17:21–23 the most eloquent witness to the fact that he did not fall into the error of confusing two things which must be kept distinct and therefore evidence of his sharp insight into the implications of the rule by which he was to be governed in the administering of the rite of circumcision. One of the outstanding features of Abraham's character was his unhesitating obedience to the revealed will
of God. This appears in the very circumcision of Ishmael. Abraham had been commanded to circumcise all males, and this command he scrupulously obeyed. He did not regard the revelation that not in Ishmael would his seed be called as providing him with any warrant for suspension of this explicitly prescribed rule of procedure. We may presume that it was likewise in the case of Rebecca. The additional revelation of the purpose of God in reference to Esau could not properly be pleaded by her as a reason for depriving Esau of the sign of circumcision. Such withholding would have been contrary to the divine institution whereby she and Isaac were to govern their conduct in this matter. The circumcision of both Ishmael and Esau, when viewed in this light, is thoroughly consonant with the principles of procedure which governed the dispensing of this sign. And the same principles govern the dispensing of baptism to infants as well as to adults. Divine institution governs its administration. That is the ground. And that is what constitutes for us the obligation to comply.

*Corroboratory Evidence*

As was indicated already the evidence in support of infant baptism is not merely the absence of any repeal of the principle in accordance with which infants received the sign and seal of the covenant under the Old Testament. There is also the positive evidence which indicates that the same principle which gave meaning and validity to the circumcision of infants under the old economy is embedded and is operative in the administration of the covenant of grace under the new. This evidence is not of the nature of an express statute authorising the baptism of infants. There is no such statute. As we have seen, it would have been unnecessary, and that because of the organic unity and continuity of the covenant and of the church in both dispensations. The positive evidence is of a different sort, and this evidence is all the more significant precisely because it is of a different sort. It is evidence of the continued existence and operation of the principle without which infant circumcision and infant baptism would be little short of monstrosities. It is the principle of representation, of soli-
darity, of corporate relationship, coming to expression in the administration of God's redemptive and saving grace in the world. In other words, it is evidence that our Lord and his apostles taught and acted upon the recognition that the same principle which provided the basis of infant circumcision was to be applied in the administration of the kingdom of God and of the church.


It might readily be thought that when our Lord said, "Suffer the little children and forbid them not to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:14; cf. Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16) he had in mind only such children as could come to Jesus of their own accord and were of sufficient age and understanding to answer to the description of Matthew 18:6, "these little ones who believe in me". Without determining the question as to the denotative scope of such an expression, it should be apparent that what Jesus says regarding the membership of little children in the kingdom of God cannot be restricted to children of sufficient age to be capable of intelligent understanding and faith. In Matthew 19:13 we are told that little children were brought to Jesus (cf. Mark 10:13) and the impression is distinctly created that the group included at least such as would not have come on their own initiative. All doubt, however, is removed by Luke 18:15, for there we are informed that the children were babes (βρέφη), that is to say, little infants. Hence our Lord's word to the effect that "of such is the kingdom of God" applies to little infants and not solely to children of more advanced years and intelligence.

Again, it might be supposed that when Jesus says, "Of such is the kingdom of God" all he means is that the kingdom of God is made up of those who are like little children and have a childlike spirit of simplicity and humility.32 It is

32 John Gill says: "The reason given for suffering little children to come to Christ; for of such is the kingdom of heaven, is to be understood in a figurative and metaphorical sense; of such who are comparable to children for modesty, meekness, and humility, and from freedom from rancour, malice, ambition and pride" (op. cit., p. 295). Gill cites Calvin
true that in immediate connection with the statement concerned Jesus does say that “whosoever will not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall by no means enter therein” (Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17; cf. Matt. 18:3). But we are not to think that this is the import of the statement in question, namely, “of such is the kingdom of God”. What Jesus is asserting here is rather that the kingdom of God belongs to little children and that they are members of it, not at all that the kingdom of God belongs to such as resemble little children. This can be shown by the following considerations.

(a) The situation that evoked this disclosure on our Lord’s part was one in which little children as such are the centre of interest. This is the case in all three passages where the statement occurs (Matt. 19:13, 14; Mark 10:13–16; Luke 18:15–17). Little children were brought to the Lord that he might touch them, lay his hands on them, and pray. The disciples were forbidding this intrusion. Apparently they thought that this was an unworthy interruption. Jesus was moved with indignation. Why? Precisely because the disciples were forbidding the little children from being brought and coming to him. It was then, and in specific reference to that incident, that Jesus said, “Suffer the little children and forbid them not to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of God”. To suppose that our Lord was not speaking directly of the little children and affirming their membership in the kingdom of God would do plain violence to the actual facts of the situation. It was with little children the disciples were concerned, it was with little children Jesus was concerned, the disciples to forbid them and Jesus to receive them. Little children were in the focus of attention and interest, and it is therefore of the little children themselves that Jesus proceeds to speak.

as supporting this view of the clause in question. This is inaccurate. What Calvin says in his comment on Matthew 19:14 is that “under this term he (Jesus) includes both little children and those who resemble them; for the Anabaptists foolishly exclude children, with whom the subject must have commenced”. Calvin clearly recognises that the clause in question refers to the membership of infants in the kingdom of God and not simply to the membership of those who resemble little children in modesty and simplicity of spirit.
(b) When Jesus says, “Suffer the little children and forbid them not to come unto me”, he is speaking of little children and not of those who are like little children in spirit and attitude. To say the least, it would be unnatural and harsh to suppose that the reason he appends to the exhortation would not have little children as its subject but another class of entirely different denotation. It should be seen that such an interpretation would not supply the proper reason for the exhortation, “Suffer the little children . . . to come unto me”.

(c) The demonstrative pronoun which is used points to the same conclusion. The pronoun (τοῦτος) means, “of this kind, sort, or class”. It is necessary to note the class of which Jesus had been speaking; it is distinctly and only of the infant class. This class alone provides us with the antecedent of the τοῦτον and not at all the class of those who are of childlike and humble spirit. Of the latter Jesus had not spoken. Neither were they in the focus of attention. The disciples were not forbidding such nor did Jesus here say of such, “Suffer them to come unto me”.

The usage of the New Testament will show also that the force of τοῦτος is not to institute a comparison but rather to specify a class, and the class specified is defined by the context. In Matthew 18:5, for example, the expression, “one such little child” (ἐν παιδίῳ τοῦτο) is not “one illustrating the humble spirit” but “one such little child”. Jesus is not saying, “Whoever will receive one like this little child in humility” but rather “one little child like this” (see also Mark 9:37). In John 4:23 the words, “The Father seeketh such to worship him” refer to those who worship in spirit and in truth and, obviously, not to those who are like such; the denotation is determined by the immediately preceding part of the verse. The following examples will verify this meaning and usage: John 9:36; Acts 19:25; 22:22; Romans 1:32; 16:18; I Corinthians 5:5; 7:15, 28; II Corinthians 2:7; 3:4; Galatians 5:21, 27; 6:1; Hebrews 7:26.

(d) The account of this incident given in Matthew 19:13, 14 has no reference to the childlike spirit requisite for entrance

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33 Cf. Calvin: Inst. IV, xvi, 7; Thomas Witherow: Scriptural Baptism — its Mode and Subjects, p. 56.
into the kingdom of heaven. Matthew, therefore, indicates that the statement, "Of such is the kingdom of heaven" was valid and was to be understood quite independently of any mention of the additional observation reported by Mark and Luke, namely, that whosoever will not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall not enter therein.

We must conclude, therefore, that when Jesus says, "Of such is the kingdom of God" he is not speaking of the class resembling little children but is referring to little children themselves and affirms unmistakeably that little children are members of the kingdom of God. The thought expressed is not the quality which fits a person for entrance into the kingdom of God but rather the place which little children themselves are to have in the redemptive ministry of Jesus and their relation to the kingdom of God.

One further observation may be made regarding these passages. In Mark 9:41 the expression, "in my name" is explained by the qualifying clause, "because ye belong to Christ". To receive them in Christ's name is therefore equivalent to receiving them as belonging to Christ. This, in turn, is but a variation of expression which has the same effect as saying that they belong to the kingdom of God.

To conclude: these two assertions — (1) that little children belong to the kingdom of God; (2) that they are to be received in Christ's name — do not offer stringent proof of infant baptism and they do not provide us with an express command to baptise infants. They do, however, supply us with certain principles which lie close to the argument for infant baptism and without which the ordinance of infant baptism would be meaningless. These principles are: (1) that little children, even infants, are among Christ's people and are members of his body; (2) that they are members of his kingdom and therefore have been regenerated; (3) that they belong to the church, in that they are to be received as belonging to Christ, that is to say, received into the fellowship of the saints. The force of all this is greatly enhanced when we remember the occasion of Jesus' assertion, "of such is the kingdom of God". The attitude of the disciples, to which these words of Jesus were the rebuke, was one that rested on the

35 Cf. ibid. p. 53.
assumption that little children were not of sufficient importance to occupy the attentions of Jesus and were not really within the compass of his kingdom task. In contrast, our Lord’s reply is to the effect that none are more intimately involved in his redemptive work and ministry than little infants and that therefore they are to be received into the bosom of the saints’ fellowship and love. If little children belong to the kingdom of God, if they belong to Christ, if they are to be received into the fellowship of believers, if they are to be reckoned as possessing the qualities and rights that constitute them members of the kingdom of God and of the church, is there any reason why they should not receive the sign of that membership? In fact it would appear to be the proper and necessary recognition of that which the Lord himself explicitly asserted and of the injunction he so emphatically gave to his disciples. Surely the inference is one of good and necessary consequence that infants should be given the sign and seal of that which, by the authority of Christ, they are to be accounted. There is nothing signified and sealed by baptism that is in excess of that which our Lord asserts infants to be and of that which he commands they should be accounted.

Obviously this does not apply to all little children. And it does not of itself settle the mooted question of the fate of infants dying in infancy. Such applications were ostensibly outside the universe of discourse. The statements of our Lord with reference to the membership of infants in the kingdom of God can be applied only to such little children as come within the compass of a covenant situation analogous to that in which our Lord’s words were spoken. Any universalising of the assertion would violate the most elementary canons of proper interpretation.

2. Ephesians 6:1, 4; Colossians 3:20, 21.

In these passages the apostle Paul includes the children among those who are addressed as saints. In the contexts of both passages exhortations are being given to the various classes of saints — wives, husbands, fathers, servants, masters. The exhortation in each case is appropriate to the specific duty and particular station of each class. It should also be noted that in each case the apostle frames and directs his
exhortation in terms of the Christian standing and character of the persons concerned. He is addressing wives, husbands, fathers, servants, masters as believers in Christ and as those therefore who recognise their allegiance to Christ as Lord. It is in such a context that children, as constituting one particular class among others, are exhorted to cultivate the specific virtue appropriate to them. It is necessary, therefore, to understand that the children are reckoned as saints in terms of the salutation in both epistles and that they are not regarded as belonging to any different category in respect of the Saviourhood and Lordship of Christ. Everything points to the conclusion that children, equally with parents and servants and masters, belong to the body of Christ and are fully embraced in the fellowship of the saints. If children were thus recognised and received in the apostolic churches, they were recognised as possessing the status of which baptism is the sign and seal. If this is so, there is no reason why such children should not have received the sign and seal of their status and privilege.

3. *I Corinthians 7:14.*

Apparently believers in Corinth who found themselves in the anomalous situation of being united in wedlock with unbelieving partners were afraid that their Christian standing and character would be prejudiced by this mixed marital relationship. The apostle was writing to encourage them against this fear. The encouragement he provides is that the unbelieving husband is sanctified in the wife and the unbelieving wife is sanctified in the brother. In order to reinforce the argument drawn from this principle he appeals to what had been apparently recognised among the Corinthians, namely, that the children of even one believing parent were not unclean but rather holy.\(^{36}\) That is the force of the statement "Else were your children unclean, but now are they holy". It is quite striking that the apostle does not feel called upon to vindicate or establish this truth; it was taken for granted

and therefore without argument pleaded as the premise already conceded by the Corinthians. This shows that the sanctification of the children of parents, only one of whom was a believer, was a recognised principle in the apostolic tradition. It is this principle, clearly enunciated in I Corinthians 7:14, that underlies the ordinance of infant baptism. It does not, of course, offer stringent proof of infant baptism. But it does show that the children of a believer are not in the same category, in respect of “sanctification”, as the children who have no Christian parentage. There is a status or condition that can be characterised as “holiness”, which belongs to children in virtue of a parental relationship.

In view of the context we cannot maintain that this “holiness” is that of regeneration. But it can be nothing less than the “holiness” of connection and privilege. It is a “holiness” that evinces the operation of the covenant and representative principle and proves that the Christian faith of even one parent involves the embrace of the offspring in a relationship that is by divine warrant described as “holy”. This is wholly consonant with the basis upon which the ordinance of infant baptism rests, just as it is counter to the moving principle of the antipaedobaptist contention.


These are the instances of household baptism. We cannot prove conclusively that there were infants in these households. But the significance of such explicit reference to the baptism of households appears when we take into account two considerations. There is, first of all, the fact that there are relatively few instances of actual baptism recorded in the New Testament.\(^\text{37}\) It is remarkable that there should be so few.

\(^{37}\) The reference here, of course, is to actual instances of Christian baptism. Cf. in this connection Thomas Witherow: op. cit., pp. 57 f. When John Gill says, for example, “it is strange, exceeding strange, that among the many thousands baptized in Jerusalem, Samaria, Corinth, and other places, that there should be no one instance of any of them bringing their children with them to be baptized, and claiming the privilege of baptism for them upon their own faith; nor of their doing this in any short time after” (op. cit., p. 306), he is not taking proper account of the fewness of references to actual baptism. He is building an argument
We should expect that there would be a very large number. For actual baptism must have been very frequent in the days of the apostles. But only some twelve instances are actually recorded (Acts 2:41; 8:12; 13, 38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5, I Cor. 1:14, 16). It is quite illuminating that at least three of these instances refer to household baptism. Every consideration would point to the conclusion that household baptism was a frequent occurrence in the practice of the church in the apostolic days. If so, it would be practically impossible to believe that in none of these households were there any infants. It would be unreasonable to believe so. The infants in the households belonged to the households and would be baptised. Presumption is, therefore, of the strongest kind, even though we do not have an overt and proven instance of infant baptism. There is, in the second place, the representative principle which is embedded in the Scripture and is woven into the warp and woof of the administration of grace in the world. When we appreciate this we can understand how readily the apostles would apply this principle in the dispensing of the ordinances of grace. Household baptism would be a perfectly natural application. And this would inevitably involve the baptism of the infants comprised in the household whenever and wherever there were such.

upon the numbers baptised, when what is relevant to the question is not the numbers actually baptised but the number of times in the New Testament in which there is reference to the actual administration of the rite.

In connection with household baptism reference might also be made to the absence of any evidence of the baptism of adults who were born of Christian parents and who were brought up in a Christian household. Paedobaptists have appealed to this consideration as providing at least presumptive evidence in favour of the belief that in apostolic practice the children of believers were baptised in infancy. Most recently, Oscar Cullmann in his booklet Die Tauflehre des Neuen Testaments (Zurich, 1948) presses this consideration rather strongly. He says, for example: "Those who dispute the Biblical character of infant Baptism have therefore to reckon with the fact that adult Baptism for sons and daughters born of Christian parents, which they recommend, is even worse attested by the New Testament than infant baptism (for which certain possible traces are discoverable) and indeed lacks any kind of proof" (p. 21; Eng. Trans. by J. K. S. Reid, Baptism in the New Testament (Chicago, 1950), p. 26).

The relevance of this text concerns the clause in verse 39, "For the promise is to you and to your children". There is no room for question that the children are coordinated with the adults who are being addressed by Peter on this occasion. And the important consideration is that the promise, which is urged as an incentive to, or reason for, repentance and baptism, stands in the same relation to the children as to the adults being addressed. This is the force of the coordination.

It might be argued that the children being contemplated here are simply and solely those of age and intelligence sufficient for the intelligent repentance urged in the preceding verse. Or it might be said that the children come into the purview of the passage and therefore within the purview of the promise only as they attain to an age of understanding which will make them capable of such repentance and also of the call referred to in the latter part of the verse. On this interpretation the promise could not be conceived of as actually embracing infants or young children. But there is nothing in the text to indicate that there is such restriction in the denotation of the children referred to. And it would be entirely counter to everything in the revelation which formed the background of Peter's statement and which provided the basis of it. We may well ask: what was there in the revelation of the Old Testament or in the teaching of Jesus which would give the least support or even plausibility to the supposition that in the denotation of those designated "children" a line of distinction must be drawn between little infants and grown-ups? To institute such discrimination would be the resort of desperation, would be without any warrant in the context of Scripture and would be contrary to the analogy of Scripture usage. Hence we must believe that the children spoken of are the children of those being addressed, and as the children of such they are for that reason placed in the same category as their parents in reference to the promise. Simply stated this means that the promise is to the children as well as to the parents and that, in respect of this property, the children are included with their parents.
We are not in a position to appreciate the significance of this unless we bear in mind the covenant relation established by God and clearly revealed in the Old Testament. It is in the light of Genesis 17:7, “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee” (cf. Deut. 29:10–13) that this word of Peter is to be understood. It is this principle, institution, or arrangement alone that gives meaning to Peter’s appeal.

Now, what does this imply? It demonstrates that Peter, in the illumination and power of the Spirit of Pentecost, recognised that there was no suspension or abrogation of that divine administration whereby children are embraced with their parents in God’s covenant promise. It is simply this and nothing less that Acts 2:39 evinces. Pentecost is to be coordinated with the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ as one of the epochal events in the economy of redemption. We may well regard Pentecost as that which brought to fruition the inauguration of the new dispensation. Nothing could advertise more conspicuously and conclusively that this principle of God’s gracious government, by which children along with their parents are the possessors of God’s covenant promise, is fully operative in the New Testament as well as in the Old than this simple fact that on the occasion of Pentecost Peter took up the refrain of the old covenant and said, “The promise is to you and to your children”. It is the certification of the Holy Spirit to us that this method of the administration of the covenant of grace is not suspended.

It is precisely because there is such evidence of the perpetual operation of this gracious principle in the administration of God’s covenant that we baptise infants. It is for that reason alone that we continue to baptise them. It is the divine institution, not, indeed, commended by human wisdom and not palatable to those who are influenced by the dictates of human wisdom, yet commended by the wisdom of God. It is the seal to us of His marvellous goodness that He is not only a God to His people but also to their seed after them.
V

Objections to Infant Baptism

Some of the objections to infant baptism have been anticipated in the earlier parts of our discussion and the answers to such objections are implicit in the argument already presented. It may be necessary, however, to bring these objections into clearer focus and deal with them more directly. There are also other objections which have not been considered so far and which require some examination.

1. One of the most persuasive objections and one which closes the argument for a great many people is that there is no express command to baptise infants and no record in the New Testament of a clear case of infant baptism. In answering such an objection there is no denial of the propositions made in the objection. It is only too apparent that if we had an express command or even a proven case with apostolic sanction, then the controversy would not have arisen; at least it would be of a very different sort. The answer to this objection is simply the reminder that an express command or a proven instance is not the only kind of evidence that should be regarded as sufficient. What by good and necessary inference can be deduced from Scripture is of authority in the church of God as well as what is expressly set down in Scripture. The evidence for infant baptism falls into the category of good and necessary inference, and it is therefore quite indefensible to demand that the evidence required must be in the category of express command or explicit instance. In other words, the assumption upon which this objection rests is a false assumption and one which cannot be adopted as the norm in determining what Christian doctrine or Christian institution is.

In reference to this objection it is necessary to be reminded again how few instances there are in the New Testament of the actual dispensing of the ordinance of Christian baptism. This places the silence regarding an overt reference to infant baptism in a very different light. And it also accords to the three explicit references to household baptism a significance
which we might not readily detect. Although there are only three instances recorded, analogy would require us to believe that household baptism was quite common. It would be unreasonable to suppose that there were no infants in these many households, and if there were infants they were included in the household baptised.

2. It is objected that the instances we have of baptism presuppose a credible and intelligent profession of faith and therefore something of which infants are incapable. It is not by any means apparent that this objection, even as a proposition, rests upon solid ground. For who is to assure us that when households were baptised every one receiving baptism was required to make an intelligent and credible profession of faith? The very proposition, therefore, is not proven.

But even if we allow for the element of truth which there is in the objection, namely, that in most cases actually referred to the dispensing of baptism is attached to the demand for repentance and faith, the objection is not a valid one. The exhortation of Peter on the day of Pentecost that his hearers should be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ was certainly coordinated with the appeal for repentance (Acts 2:38). And the baptism of the Philippian jailor by Paul followed upon the appeal, “Believe upon the Lord Jesus” and the speaking to him the Word of God (Acts 16:31–33). But these and like instances do not settle the question at issue. Such preaching and administration of baptism presuppose the presence of adults, and it is not a matter of dispute that where adults are being baptised there must be the demand for repentance and faith and a credible confession. It does not follow that infants, who in the nature of the case are not capable of making such confession, are ineligible for baptism.\(^39\) It no more follows that infants are excluded than does it follow that they are excluded from salvation. In the case of adults intelligent repentance and faith are the conditions of salvation. But intelligent repentance and faith are not the conditions of salvation in the case of infants. They are not psychologically capable of such faith and its corresponding confession. It is

so in reference to baptism. In the case of adults the demand of repentance and faith in order to baptism is mandatory. The instances which are adduced by the opponents of infant baptism could have relevance only where adults were concerned. But they can have no relevance to the case of infants who cannot be the subjects of such preaching and of the demand for repentance which accompanies it.

3. It can be objected that we have no way of knowing whether or not infants are regenerate, whether or not they are members of Christ's body. It is, admittedly, quite true that we have no way of inquiring into the subjective spiritual state of little infants. But the objection based on this fact has no validity. Baptism is not dispensed on the basis of our knowledge that the person concerned is regenerate. This is not true even in the case of adults. In accordance with divine institution the ordinance is administered to those who make an intelligent and credible profession of faith. In the case of infants it is administered on the basis of the divine institution and not on the basis of a prerogative which the present objection assumes.

4. It is objected that infants cannot understand the meaning of that which is dispensed. Of course they cannot. But that they derive no benefit from baptism or that it is not the divine method of signifying and sealing blessing to them is by no means a proper inference. The same objection would apply to circumcision and would impinge upon the wisdom and grace of God who instituted it. The same objection, if valid, would apply to Christ's blessing of little infants. This objection, in fact, rests upon the iniquitous assumption that all blessing is contingent upon conscious understanding of its import on our part. Are we to say, for example, that it is of no avail to the infant to be born and nurtured in a Christian family simply because the infant has no conscious understanding of the great blessing that belongs to him in the care, protection, devotion, and nurture of Christian parents? Is it of no significance to the infant to be "laid in Christ's way" simply because the infant does not yet know that to be the case? And to aver that to be baptised into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost can have little or no meaning because the infant does not know the meaning
is utterly to misconstrue the nature of God's grace and of his institutions. The means of grace are the channels along which the saving and sanctifying grace of God flows. To be in the channel of grace by God's appointment is of deepest consequence. It is only worldly-wise calculation and not reasoning inspired by the recognition of the methods of divine grace that can find any force in this type of objection.

5. It may appear to be an argument of some weight to appeal to the sad record of so many who have been baptised in infancy — they have grown up to be indifferent to the baptismal engagements and have often lived lives of infidelity and godlessness. This record is not denied. The sad truth is to be deplored. But perversion and abuse are never proper arguments against an institution. The perversion of the best is the worst. This objection tells as much against adult baptism as against infant baptism. Many baptised on their own confession have proven unfaithful and have lived godless lives.

What this record does prove is the necessity of appreciating the great truth that the institutions of grace always carry with them their responsibilities and obligations. Too often those who are the beneficiaries of this institution of grace rest upon the institution rather than upon the God whose administration it is. Hence the moral and spiritual catastrophes of Christian history.

6. It is objected that the argument drawn from circumcision is not valid because of the great discrepancy that exists between circumcision and baptism. The difference between the import of circumcision and that of baptism is not at all what is claimed to be the case. It has been shown already that there is an essential identity of meaning, an identity confirmed by the New Testament itself (cf. Col. 2:11, 12). The force of the objection might, however, appear to take on a good deal of plausibility when we are reminded that circumcision was administered only to males, whereas in baptism such discrimination between male and female is obliterated. It is true that only males were circumcised. Why a sign and seal had been selected under the Old Testament which could be dispensed only to males it is not our present interest to determine. This was the divine institution. It is,

however, altogether consonant with the extension of grace and the expansion of privilege revealed in the New Testament that a sign should be chosen in the new economy that could be dispensed to females just as well as to males. Is it not one of the glories of the New Testament that there is now in Christ Jesus no longer male nor female, just as there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, barbarian nor Scythian? And it is consonant with the contrasted relative restrictions of the Old Testament that only males should bear this covenant sign and seal. But this difference in no way affects the fact that circumcision was the sign and seal of the covenant of God's grace under the Old Testament, that it was dispensed to infants, that this administration implied that infants were embraced with their parents in the covenant favour of God, that this is an established principle in the economy of divine grace, that baptism takes the place of circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant, and that the administering of baptism to infants stands in the most intimate relation to the administering of circumcision to them under the Old Testament. The differences as well as the similarities bespeak, and are consonant with, the sum total of factors which have to be taken into account as we unfold the relationships that exist between the two Testaments.

7. It is objected that paedobaptists are strangely inconsistent in dispensing baptism to infants and yet refusing to admit them to the Lord's table. The supposed analogy of the passover might appear to give added point to this objection and the inconsistency of paedobaptists made more blatant. Under the Old Testament, it may be said, infants were circumcised and partook of the passover. Under the New Testament Baptists exclude infants from both of the corresponding ordinances, baptism and the Lord's supper. Exclusion from the former is consonant with exclusion from the latter. And exclusion from the Lord's supper indicates the cleavage that exists in this matter between the Old Testament and the New, a cleavage exemplified also in the exclusion of infants from baptism in contradistinction from the Old Testament under which they received circumcision. On the other hand, paedobaptists appeal to Old Testament circumcision in support of the argument for infant baptism but
abandon the analogy of the Old Testament completely when it comes to the Lord's supper.

The fallacy of this kind of argument, as far as the passover is concerned, resides in the assumption that little infants partook of the passover. There is no evidence that this was the case. It would be unreasonable to think that they did; the diet was hardly suitable for infants. That children when they grew up and were able to ask: “what mean ye by this service?” and were able to understand its meaning partook of the passover is altogether likely. But children of such age and intelligence are in a different category from infants. Paedobaptists do not refuse to admit to the Lord’s table children of sufficient age and understanding to know the meaning of the Lord’s supper.

But the main point of the objection needs to be considered on its own merits, quite apart from the argument respecting the passover. Why baptise infants if we do not admit them to the Lord’s table?

At the outset it should be admitted that if paedobaptists are inconsistent in this discrimination, then the relinquishment of infant baptism is not the only way of resolving the inconsistency. It could be resolved by going in the other direction, namely, that of admitting infants to the Lord’s supper. And when all factors entering into this dispute are taken into account, particularly the principle involved in infant baptism, then far less would be at stake in admitting infants to the Lord’s supper than would be at stake in abandoning infant baptism. This will serve to point up the significance of infant baptism in the divine economy of grace.

It does not, however, follow that there is the inconsistency alleged. The following considerations show that there are distinctions between the Lord’s supper and baptism which make it reasonable, to say the least, that the one should be dispensed to infants and the other not.

(a) Baptism signifies and seals what lies at the basis and inception of a state of salvation, to wit, union with Christ, cleansing from the pollution of sin, and cleansing from the guilt of sin. It signifies what infants may possess as well as adults and must possess in order to be in a state of salvation.

(b) The Lord’s supper, on the other hand, signifies some-
thing that is consequent upon the state of salvation. It presupposes that which is sealed by baptism. The two central significations of the Lord's supper are commemoration and communion. Commemoration implies the recognition of Christ as our Saviour who died for us, communion the recognition that he as our resurrected and living Saviour is present with us and seals that presence in the elements of bread and wine. The notions associated with the Lord's supper, such as remembrance, communion, discerning of the Lord's body, are of such a nature that they involve conscious intelligent understanding. It is surely reasonable to infer that such intelligent exercise of heart and mind belongs to the essence of that which the Lord's supper contemplates. And, if so, it is sharply distinguished from that signified and sealed by baptism.

(c) Baptism represents something that is performed once for all and is not repeated. The fruits and blessings of that which is represented are permanent and ever-increasing. But the grace represented is unrepeatable. This is why baptism is dispensed only once.

(d) It is otherwise with the Lord's supper. It represents what is daily repeated in the life of the believer. Hence the Lord's supper is to be received frequently.

(e) It is far from irrelevant to observe the difference between baptism and the Lord's supper in respect of the elements used and the actions involved. Baptism is washing with water, something necessary and appropriate to the infant in the earliest stages of life. There is nothing in the element or the action incongruous with earliest infancy. The Lord's supper is the partaking of bread and wine. We can readily

41 The objection on the part of antipaedobaptists, to the effect that the exercise of intelligent understanding required in the partaking of the Lord's supper is entirely parallel to that required on the part of adults in the case of baptism and therefore cannot be consistently pleaded by paedobaptists as a reason for excluding infants from the Lord's supper any more than it can be pleaded as a reason for excluding them from baptism, is not valid. What is being pleaded is that the very things signified by the Lord's supper involve intelligent understanding on the part of the participant. The things signified by baptism, however, do not necessarily involve intelligent understanding, and baptism may therefore be administered to those who are incapable of such understanding. The parallelism which antipaedobaptists plead is apparent and not real.
detect that there is in the elements used and the actions involved something that is not congruous with early infancy. To say the least, we encounter a difficulty is dispensing the Lord's supper to infants that is not even suggested in the case of baptism.

In all of this we see a striking parallelism between the sealing ordinances of the Old and New Testaments. Without reiterating all the points of resemblance, suffice it to be reminded that circumcision was administered to infants; it was administered only once; it was appropriate to infants; it was the rite of initiation; there is no evidence that infants partook of the passover; the diet was not appropriate to their age; the passover was repeated each year.

Summarily stated, baptism represents the inclusion of the person baptised in the body of Christ and in the fellowship of the saints — it is the rite that signifies initiation; the Lord's supper represents the abiding responsibility of and provision for those who are the members of Christ's body — it is the rite of edification.

We see, therefore, that there is a series of considerations wholly consonant with the practice of paedobaptists when they dispense baptism to infants and exclude them from the Lord's supper. The diversity in the ordinances warrants the discrimination in practice. Instead of being charged with inconsistency we should rather claim that the practice of paedobaptists reflects the considerations which inhere in the nature and characteristics of the respective ordinances.

VI

WHOSE CHILDREN ARE TO BE BAPTISED?

The question raised in the above caption is very largely the question: what parents are eligible to receive baptism for their children? In dealing with this question it is necessary to be reminded again of the distinction between the terms in which the church must be defined, on the one hand, and the prerogative which belongs to men in the divinely instituted administration exercised by them, on the other. In the
forum of conscience and in the forum of divine judgment only those united to Christ and who are members of his body have a right to present their children for baptism. The basis of infant baptism is the covenant relation which God has established with his people and the covenant relationship which the children of such sustain to God by His own institution. Those who are not in covenant with God cannot claim any of the rights and privileges which belong to the covenant. This needs to be emphasised in order to obviate a good many of the errors which have distorted or perplexed thinking on this subject. Only those united to Christ in the virtue of his death and in the efficacy and power of his resurrection have a right before God to claim the promises of the covenant of grace; only such can claim the privilege which God bestows upon their children and the promises He gives in respect of them to His covenant people.

We are now interested, however, more particularly in the criteria which are to be applied by men in the administration of this ordinance, the criteria by which men are to judge in the administration which God has committed to them. Since baptism is the sign and seal of union with Christ and of membership in his body the church, it scarcely needs to be said that the sine qua non of eligibility is that the parents themselves must have been baptised. The basis of infant baptism is the covenant relationship which God has established. If parents are not willing to avow this covenant and receive its sign and seal, it would be mockery for them to present their children for baptism on the basis of a covenant institution which they do not acknowledge. Only baptised parents may present their children for baptism.

Baptised parents are, however, of two kinds, those baptised in infancy and those baptised as adults on the basis of personal confession of faith. In the case of the latter it is apparent that their baptism presupposes an intelligent and credible confession of faith, and so, when they present their children for baptism, there is not only the antecedent of their own baptism but also the confession of faith prerequisite to it. Hence, in their case, there are in reality two prerequisites, confession of faith and baptism. But how is it in the case of those who have been baptised in infancy? No personal con-
fession of faith preceded their baptism. Are they to receive baptism for their children on the ground that they themselves have been baptised and on that ground alone, that is to say, on the ground of their confederate membership in the church?

It should be understood that the mere fact of baptism in infancy does not entitle the persons thus baptised to any of the privileges of the church of Christ if, when they come to years of discretion and understanding, they show no interest in covenant responsibilities and privileges. If they are indifferent and walk contrary to the gospel they are to be disciplined accordingly, and one of the ways in which such discipline would be exercised is the denial to them of the privilege of baptism for their children until they repent and amend their ways. Confederate members of the church, it should be remembered, are under the discipline of the church. Too frequently this is forgotten. Neither they themselves nor the church may proceed on the assumption that they are immune to discipline until they become communicant members. But, while it is conceded that baptised members who contradict their covenant engagements by a life and walk contrary to the gospel are not eligible to receive baptism for their children, what of those who have been baptised in infancy, and are outwardly circumspect in their lives and attentive upon the means of grace? May they receive baptism for their children simply on the basis of their confederate membership in the church? Or are they also required to make public confession of faith in Christ as their Saviour and Lord, a confession equivalent to that which would be required if they were receiving baptism for themselves?

Such a question ought to remind us again that confederate members of the church as well as communicant members are under the supervision and discipline of the church. If the church is vigilant and faithful, confederate members will be constantly under the instruction of the church and, ordinarily, long before they have children of their own, will be confronted with their covenant responsibilities and privileges. They will be advised that the necessary implicate of the covenant relation, sealed by their baptism in infancy, is the open avowal and embrace of that covenant and the public confession of Christ as their only Saviour and Lord. To deny
this logical necessity is to make mockery of the covenant that is sealed by baptism. If, therefore, confederate members are not ready or willing to embrace the covenant grace sealed by baptism and not willing to make the confession incident to it, then they are liable to discipline and, obviously, they are not in a fit state to receive baptism for their children. Confession of faith is involved, therefore, in the very avowal of the covenant which is presupposed in the presentation of children for baptism.

In speaking of the discipline which is exercised over confederate members, and particularly when they come to years of understanding or maturity, it should be understood that there is no stereotyped pattern of discipline. Each case must be dealt with on its merits, and great patience and prudence as well as faithfulness must be exercised in bringing people to a realisation of what is entailed in the baptismal covenant. There is the danger of formal confession without meaning, and there is also the danger of undue hesitation and delay. But that confession of faith is the condition of receiving baptism for our children inheres in the very logic of the covenant relation. The presentation of children for baptism implies avowal of the covenant, an avowal which implies confession, and this surely requires that those who are charged with the administration should insure that the confession is intelligent and consistent. Sufficient has already been said to show that the confession in view can be nothing less than a confession of faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord, that is to say, a confession of true faith and not merely of intellectual or historical faith. It is a confession of faith that corresponds to that of which baptism is the sign and seal, namely, union with Christ and membership in his body the church.

There remains the question, which has often been a burning one: what is the relation of communicant membership to eligibility for the reception of baptism for infants? It is apparent that the confession required for the reception of baptism for infants is the confession which makes the persons concerned eligible for communicant membership. It is a great fallacy and one fraught with grave consequence to suppose that there is such a thing in the New Testament as dual confession, one entitling to baptism and another, of a higher
order, entitling to communicant membership. There is no warrant for such dualism in our conception of confession. Hence it should be accepted as incontrovertible that the confession made in baptism, whether it be our own baptism or the baptism of our children, is the confession required for communicant membership. Those making this confession should be admitted, and should consider themselves as obligated to come, to the Lord’s table. But what of those who, nevertheless, refrain from coming? May they be denied baptism for their children until they do come?

Here again each case must be dealt with on its own merits. There is no stereotyped pattern of treatment. It is easy to envisage cases in which persons making a thoroughly satisfactory confession might receive baptism for their children

\[\text{William Cunningham has reflected ably and cogently on this fallacy which he regarded as a growing evil in his day. He says: "So far as concerns the subjects of the sacraments... it is generally admitted, that partaking in the Lord’s Supper implies a profession of faith in Christ, and is therefore warrantable and beneficial only to believers. But many, and we fear a growing number, refuse to admit this principle as applicable to baptism. It is contended, not only that infants who are incapable of faith ought to be baptised... but also that adults may be admitted to baptism, though they are not, and do not profess to be, believers and regenerate persons,—baptism, it is alleged, not expressing or implying a profession of believing in Christ, but only a profession of willingness to be instructed in the principles of Christianity. This notion is flatly opposed to the leading views with respect to the sacraments which have always prevailed in the Protestant churches, and been embodied in the Reformed confessions... The attempt to make so wide a gulf between baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and to extend the application of baptism beyond the range of the membership of the church, so as to include all who are placed, by their own voluntary act, or that of their parents, under the church’s superintendence and instruction, while neither in connection with their own baptism nor that of their children are they held to make a profession of faith and regeneration, is, of course, flatly opposed to the definition or description of a sacrament, given in the confessions of the Reformed churches as applicable to both ordinances. It is also, we are persuaded, inconsistent with every consideration suggested by the symbolic or emblematic character of the ordinance as an outward act, implying a declaration or profession of a certain state of mind and feeling on the part of the person baptized, and with all that is asserted or indicated in Scripture as to the connection between baptism on the one hand, and remission and regeneration on the other" ("Zwingle and the Doctrine of the Sacraments", op. cit., pp. 268 ff.).} \]
before the actual opportunity might present itself for them to carry their confession to its logical result by partaking of the Lord's supper. It would be unduly harsh to require in such cases that the baptism of their infants should be postponed until the opportunity would present itself for them to partake of communion. By confession they are received to communicant membership, and it should be taken for granted that they will fulfil that obligation when the opportunity arrives. In the meantime they may receive baptism for their infants.

But the situation is more complex where there is the refusal to partake of the Lord's supper, and especially where this refusal is persistent and prolonged. The confession made for the reception of baptism is a confession of faith in Christ as Saviour and of fidelity to him as Lord. Such a confession clearly implies the obligation to obey Christ's commands and, specifically in this connection, the command to commemorate his dying love, "This do in remembrance of me". Persistent refusal to fulfil the implicate of the Christian confession subjects the person to the discipline of the church. It would be inconsistent with the requirements of discipline to ignore the sin of disobedience to Christ's command. One of the inevitable measures of discipline to be exercised in such a case would be to deny to the persons involved the privilege of baptism for their children.

Again it needs to be said, however, that every case must be dealt with on its own merits. Among those who refrain from the Lord's supper there is much diversity. Some are careless and indifferent and they must be dealt with according to the character of their perversity. Some may be afflicted with a spurious piety that underestimates the significance of the ritual observed in the Lord's supper. They must be dealt with in a different way. Some are imbued with a wholesome tenderness and deep sense of the solemnity of the Lord's supper. Such must be encouraged, and instructed to understand that the Lord's supper is for all who love the Lord in sincerity and truth, that the Lord's supper is not for the elite of believers but for the weak as well as for the strong.

The severity of discipline, therefore, must be proportionate to the gravity of the offense. And in judging the gravity of
the offense all the circumstances and conditions must be taken into account. The general principle, however, must hold that the confession required for the baptism of our infants is of such a character that obedience to Christ's dying command is one of its implications. And where such obedience is absent the disobedient makes himself or herself ineligible for the enjoyment of the privileges which follow upon the confession. Not the least of these privileges is the baptism of infant offspring.

VII

THE EFFICACY OF BAPTISM

The rite of baptism consists in washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. It involves, therefore, the use of a visible element and an observable action. The meaning of this washing with water is that it signifies and seals a spiritual fact or relationship, namely, union with Christ and membership in his body the church. What efficacy attaches to this observable action?

It is apparent that as a sign or seal it should not be identified with that which is signified and sealed. That which signifies is not the thing signified and that which seals is not the thing sealed. The sign or seal presupposes the existence of that which is signified or sealed. Hence baptism is the sign and seal of a spiritual reality which is conceived of as existing. Where that reality is absent the sign or seal has no efficacy.43

Equally pertinent is the observation that the sign or seal does not bring into existence that which is signified or sealed.

43 It is not being forgotten that the administration of baptism, in addition to the proclamation of the gospel, is one way in which God declares and certifies to us the truth of the gospel. The dispensing of baptism even in the presence of unbelievers has, therefore, a teaching and witnessing ministry and brings vividly to the attention of those who are without Christ our sinful condition, the provision of the gospel, and the high privilege of union with Christ. Both sacraments may be said to have this efficacy of bringing home to the ungodly what the gospel is. They should always be dispensed in connection with the preaching of the Word and in such coordination they serve to enforce the gospel. But this kind of efficacy is not the subject with which we are now dealing. The question is the efficacy of baptism in reference to those to whom it is dispensed.
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It does not effect union with Christ. In other words, baptism does not convey or confer the grace which it signifies. Baptism is a means of grace but not a means of conferring the grace represented. It is a means of grace to signify and confirm grace. The notion that it is the instrument of bestowing the grace or of constituting the fact signified is contrary to the nature of the rite as a sign and seal.

What precisely is its efficacy? It might be argued that if the grace it signifies or seals is presupposed, what need is there for this ordinance? Is not the grace of God sufficiently real and secure in itself apart from any additional testimony or confirmation? And especially when we think of the great difference that exists between external visible action and internal spiritual relationship, does not the visible action detract from the real meaning of the spiritual relation? It is here that we must guard against our own reasoning and appreciate the wisdom and goodness of God. God condescends to our weakness. He not only unites His people to Christ but He also advertises that great truth by an ordinance which portraits visibly to our senses the reality of this grace. It is a testimony which God has been pleased to give to us so that we may the better understand the high privilege of union with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is the purpose of baptism as a sign. And what is its purpose as seal? As seal it authenticates, confirms, guarantees the reality and security of this covenant grace. It is not indeed indispensable to the grace sealed; the grace exists prior to the seal and the seal does not produce the grace sealed. But just as God confirmed His promise to Noah by the bow in the cloud and confirmed His promise to Abraham by the interposition of an oath, so He confirms to us the reality and security of the highest of spiritual relationships by adding the seal of baptism. God does not need baptism to confirm Himself in His faithfulness.

44 This is directed against the notion of baptismal regeneration. It hardly seems necessary to set forth any extended refutation of this sacerdotalist conception. It has been ably dealt with by various representatives of the evangelical tradition. Cf., e.g., Charles Hodge: Systematic Theology, III, pp. 591 ff.; Thomas McCrie: Lectures on Christian Baptism (Edinburgh, 1850), pp. 13 ff., pp. 157 ff.; Thomas Blake: The Covenant Sealed (London, 1655), Chapter XI; William Cunningham: op. cit., pp. 241 ff.
It is additional certification with which He provides us so that we may thereby be confirmed in the faith of his grace. He thereby shows more abundantly the immutability of the covenant relation in order that we may have strong consolation. It is strange blindness that will not perceive and appreciate the wisdom and goodness of such an institution, and it is a strange underestimation of our need that will not discern its preceptive necessity.

It has appeared to many paedobaptists that it is necessary to distinguish between the efficacy of baptism as it applies to adults and as it applies to infants.\(^4\) There does not seem to

\(^{4}\) The present writer is aware of the difficulty and appreciates the attempts made to resolve the difficulty by some of the ablest of Reformed theologians. William Cunningham and James Bannerman, for example, maintained that a line of discrimination must be drawn, in reference to this matter, between the baptism of infants and the baptism of adults (cf. William Cunningham: op. cit., pp. 245 ff.; James Bannerman: op. cit., pp. 106 ff.). It may be quite correct to say with Cunningham that adult baptism is "that from which mainly and principally we should form our conceptions of what baptism is and means, and was intended to accomplish" (op. cit., p. 246) and that adult baptism affords "the proper fundamental type of the ordinance" (p. 247). The teaching of the New Testament in respect of the efficacy of baptism appears, in the main, in connection with address directed to adults in urging upon them the implications of baptism. But when Cunningham says that "it is adult baptism alone which embodies and brings out the full idea of the ordinance" (p. 246), or when Bannerman says that "it is an error... to make Baptism applicable in the same sense and to the same extent to infants and to adults" (p. 109), there does not appear to be good warrant for such discrimination. Furthermore, Bannerman's distinction between the right of property and the right of possession, by which he maintains that the baptism of infants has reference only to the right of property in the covenant as distinguished from the right of possession, does not seem to rest upon the requisite Biblical data. In the case of the infant he considers baptism to be "a prospective seal in connection with the faith which he has not at the moment, but which he may have afterwards" (p. 116). It is true that infants are not capable of faith and repentance in the sense in which such are predicated of adults. And it is quite true that infants cannot lay their hands upon the right which baptism signifies and plead it in faith (cf. pp. 115 f.). But this type of argument for distinguishing between the efficacy of infant baptism and adult baptism appears to rest upon a fallacy, namely, the fallacy of failing to lay sufficient emphasis upon the fact that that which is signified and sealed by baptism is not necessarily mediated by the intelligent exercise of faith and repentance. That which is signified by baptism, namely, union with Christ, regeneration, and justification, is not in the case of infants mediated
be good warrant for this distinction. Baptism has one import, and it bears this same import whether it is dispensed to adults or to infants. It signifies union with Christ, purifying from the pollution of sin by regeneration of the Spirit, and purifying from the guilt of sin by the blood of Christ. It can have no other import for infants than this. As a sign and seal of such grace the sign and seal must have the same efficacy for infants as for adults. It is, of course, true that in the case of adults the possession of the grace signified and sealed is in-

by intelligent faith. Yet infants may possess these graces to the fullest extent. Infants may have full possession of that which baptism signifies, and it is the possession that baptism signifies and seals.

Again, we are not to take for granted that adult baptism, as distinguished from infant baptism, necessarily provides us with the fundamental type of baptism. Was this true in the case of circumcision? And we are not by any means to take for granted that the references to the import and efficacy of baptism in the New Testament appear only in connection with those who were baptised as adults.

If we think of the prospective reference in baptism, we must bear in mind that it has a prospective reference both to infants and adults. That which is sealed by baptism has many implications for the future. Baptism as the seal of union with Christ is the seal of God's covenant faithfulness and the pledge of our fidelity to the God of covenant. Hence it looks forward to the ever-increasing realisation of God's favour and blessing. In a word, it is prospective of the full fruition of the covenant relation which it seals. But principally infants and adults are in the same position regarding such a prospect.

The sum total of the evidence relevant to this question would not appear to support the contention that in the matter of efficacy we may distinguish between infant and adult baptism.

There is a statement in Calvin that might be appealed to in support of this distinction which we are now controverting. It is to the effect that infants "are baptised into future repentance and faith; for though these graces have not yet been formed in them, the seed of both lies hid in them by the secret operation of the Spirit" (Inst. IV, xvi, 20; cf. J. K. S. Reid in Scottish Journal of Theology, June, 1950, p. 172). It is not so clear, however, that Calvin would espouse this hard and fast line of distinction which we are now considering. For Calvin in this very connection lays great emphasis upon the fact that infants "now receive some portion of that grace, of which they will ere long enjoy the full abundance" (Inst. IV, xvi, 19), and that infants now may be irradiated with faint rays of what will in heaven illuminate them with full splendour. He makes allowance for the distinction between infants and adults in respect of experience and knowledge, but the direction of his thought is to distinguish between germ and full growth and not between efficacy in the respective cases.
separable from the exercise of intelligent faith and repentance. And in administering baptism to adults the church requires an intelligent and credible confession of such faith. The possession of the grace signified by baptism does not presuppose in the case of infants the exercise of intelligent faith and repentance: they are not yet psychologically capable of such. And the church cannot require any intelligent and credible profession on their part. The accompaniments of the grace signified by baptism and the prerequisites for its administration differ in the respective cases. But it is a mistake to think that the import or signification differs. Baptism signifies union with Christ and membership in his body. It means this for both adults and infants. And so, in respect of efficacy, baptism is for infants precisely what it is for adults, namely, the divine testimony to their union with Christ and the divine certification and authentication of this great truth. Though infants are not capable of the intelligent exercise of faith, they are, nevertheless, susceptible to God’s efficacious grace in uniting them to Christ, in regenerating them by His Spirit, and in sprinkling them with the blood of His Son. This grace, in the bonds of an everlasting covenant, infants may fully possess. This is what baptism signifies and seals, and no warrant can be elicited for the assumption that in respect of efficacy this sign or seal has any other effect in the case of infants than in the case of adults. The efficacy of baptism in all cases is that it is God’s testimony to and seal upon the reality and security of the grace which He bestows in accordance with the provisions of the covenant of grace. And this grace is nothing less than union with the three persons of the Godhead in the unity expressed by their joint possession of the one name and in the richness of the distinctive relationship which each person of the Godhead sustains to the people of God in the economy of the covenant of grace.

It is germane to the question of the efficacy of baptism to ask: what comfort may we derive from baptism, both as respects our own baptism and the baptism of the infant seed of believers? What needs to be stressed in this connection is that we may never divorce the faith of God’s covenant grace from the discharge of those obligations which inhere in the covenant relation. Covenant privilege always entails covenant responsibility. And this is just saying that the comfort and
confidence of God's covenant mercy may never be severed from covenant keeping. It is an abuse that turns the grace of God into lasciviousness to divorce faith from piety and obedience. Faith severed from obedience is presumption, just as formal obedience severed from faith is self-righteousness. This principle needs to be applied to both aspects of the question, the comfort derived from our own baptism and the comfort we entertain with reference to infants.

To suppose that we may entertain any confidence respecting the covenant grace signified and sealed by our baptism, if we are destitute of godly fear, if we break God's covenant, and walk contrary to his commandments, would be contradiction. The fear of the Lord, the keeping of his covenant, and obedience to his commandments are the means through which and the conditions upon which those who have received the pledge of God's faithfulness may entertain the assurance and comfort of His faithfulness. To divorce faith and assurance of faith from fidelity to our covenant engagements is to be guilty of an abstraction which does not exist in God's arrangements. And faith exercised in such abstraction is not the faith of God's elect but the presumption that will at the end receive the rebuke of disillusionment, "I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity" (Luke 13:27).

Hence the sign and seal of baptism can be no pledge or guarantee to us of that which baptism signifies except as we are mindful of God's covenant, embrace its promises, discharge its obligations, and lay hold in faith upon the covenant faithfulness of God. To think or believe in any other direction is to lapse into the error to which the Scripture answer is: "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. We who died to sin, how shall we any longer live therein? Or are ye ignorant that as many of us as were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:1–4).

Respecting infant baptism we must ask: what comfort or assurance may we entertain regarding infants who have been baptised? In this connection, also, the same principle has
to be noted and stressed. The Scripture does not extend to parents who have received baptism for their children, nor to the church of God, an assurance or guarantee that the children concerned are without condition the partakers of the grace signified and sealed by baptism. The faith of God’s covenant grace and promise cannot be entertained in respect of children and children’s children in abstraction from covenant keeping and faithfulness. To divorce the faith of God’s promise from the faithful and persevering discharge of covenant obligations is presumption and mockery. The faith of God’s covenant grace to children is always in a context. It always has an environment. For there are no abstractions in God’s economy of mercy. The environment is, in a word, faithfulness. The degree of faith and assurance that God’s promise to them will be fulfilled is proportionate to the extent to which the fear of God, the keeping of His covenant, and the doing of His commandments rule in the heart and life. Such faithfulness to God’s covenant is an embrace of commitment; it includes all that is involved in the bringing up of children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, a nurture which is not simply Christian but a nurture which is administered by the Lord Himself and of which parents are but the delegated instruments or intermediaries of execution. This nurture is the means through which God’s covenant grace and promise come to realisation and fruition. And faith abstracted from the devoted and sustained discharge of such nurture is not the faith of God’s covenant Word.

While the nature of baptism warns us against abuse and, when properly interpreted, precludes all presumptuous wrest-
There are institutions in terms of which the members of the race sustain corporate relations to one another. The most basic of such institutions is the family and, as far as the history and government of this world are concerned, the solidarity established in the family is indestructible. Sin has, indeed, corrupted this relationship, and the solidarity is the medium through which sin is accentuated and aggravated. God visits the iniquities of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Him (cf. Exod. 20:5). The solidarity is thus not annulled. And the marvel of God’s grace is that as redemption supervenes upon the wreck and ruin of sin it flows in the channel of that very same solidarity which exists by divine institution, an institution which sin has corrupted but has not destroyed. God deals savingly with men in their organic corporate relationships. He shows lovingkindness unto thousands of them that love Him and keep His commandments (cf. Exod. 20:6). “The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children’s children; to such as keep his covenant, and to those that remember his precepts to do them” (Ps. 103:17, 18).

The more limited solidarity which exists in the family is embraced within a broader solidarity which God has established in the church. These two institutions, the family and the church, mutually minister to each other. In the operations of saving grace God fulfils His purposes in accordance with covenant provisions. One of these gracious provisions is that God is not only a God to the believer but also to his seed after him. It is in the faith of this institution, in the embrace of its promises, and in the discharge of its obligations that believing parents present their infant seed for baptism as the sign and seal of the covenant of grace. They commit them not only to God’s care but also to His covenant faithfulness. The efficacy of infant baptism principally consists in this that it is to us the certification or seal that God works in accordance with this covenant provision and fulfils His covenant promises. It is, after all, the Lord’s own nurture which infant baptism signifies and seals.

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OATH AND ORDEAL SIGNS
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A MORE authentic identification of the covenant signs of circumcision and baptism has been made possible through the recovery of their original historical context of covenant form and ceremony. It will be found that the new view of these rites opened up to us by our improved historical perspective challenges the divergent ecclesiastical traditions, not merely at distinctive points peculiar to one or another communion but, more significantly, in respect to that which has been their area of (at least formal) agreement. Specifically, the traditional consensus that these sacramental symbols are primarily if not exclusively signs of divine grace and blessing is now called in question. And perhaps in this there is cause for hope. For if it should really be the case that our common foundations are being shaken under us by advances in historical knowledge, it could prove difficult to maintain our composedly adamant stance of antagonism over against each other. We might find ourselves tumbling together, head over traditions.

I. CIRCUMCISION, SYMBOLIC OATH SANCTION

A. Sign of Malediction

Genesis 17 contains the record of the institution of circumcision as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham and his house. This chapter is not, like the Decalogue or Deuteronomy, the text of a treaty but an historical narrative describing the ratification ceremony of the covenant. The narrative, however, consists largely of the words that God spoke to Abraham

1 See my "Law Covenant", The Westminster Theological Journal XXVII (November, 1964), 1, pp. 1-20, especially n. 30 (hereafter, "Law Covenant").
on that occasion and those words comprise the standard elements found in ancient vassal treaties.²

Corresponding to the usual preamble with its introduction of the speaker is the Lord’s declaration to Abraham: “I am God Almighty” (v. 1b).³ Prominently featured are the stipulations of this covenant, including the so-called Grundsatz-erklärung, a general statement of the nature of the covenantal relationship: Yahweh will be a God to Abraham and his descendants (v. 7) and Abraham is to walk before him in true loyalty (v. 1c). The special obligation laid upon the covenant servants is that of circumcision (vv. 9–14). The communal performance of this rite on that very day served to consummate the ratificatory proceedings of this particular covenantal engagement (vv. 23–27). But the obligation of circumcision was to continue beyond that day as a permanent duty of the Abrahamic community. Certain obligations are assumed by the Lord of the covenant also, as is the case in some of the extra-biblical treaties, though rarely. These are appropriately expressed in the form of promises (vv. 2, 4–8). Since in this covenant the Suzerain is also the divine Witness, the promissory obligations which Yahweh undertakes as Suzerain are also a blessing sanction which he will honor as the divine Witness when he beholds faithfulness in the covenant servant. Another element of the treaty pattern, i.e., the sanctions, is thus included here among the stipulations.⁴ Curse sanction appears too, appended to the stipulation regarding circumcision (v. 14). Also in the category of divine promise or

² In his doctoral dissertation, Zur Datierung der “Genesis-P-Stücke”, Kampen, 1964, Samuel R. Kulling argues from the treaty pattern in Genesis 17 to the unity and early date of the chapter. He indicates the wider implications of his conclusions for documentary theories that regard Genesis 17 as part of the supposed P source. On the treaty pattern generally see my Treaty of the Great King, Grand Rapids, 1936 (hereafter, TGK).

³ Although the account in Genesis 17 does not include the customary historical prologue, the somewhat earlier covenant revelation to Abraham recorded in Genesis 15:7 contains a Decalogue-like combination of titulature and history: “I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees”. Cf. Josh. 24:2 ff. for another version of this in a later historical prologue.

⁴ See “Law Covenant”, p. 20, n. 29.
blessing sanction is the further revelation centering in the role of Sarah (vv. 15–21).

In short, the transaction recorded in Genesis 17 may be identified as a covenant of the vassal type, an administration of the lordship of the covenant Giver, binding his servant to himself in consecrated service under dual sanctions, blessing and curse.

Of special importance in the establishment of vassal covenants was the function of the oath. It was by an oath that the vassal expressed his incorporation within the sphere of the lord's jurisdiction. This oath invoked the covenant sanctions, more precisely, the curse, so that curse became a synonym for oath. And this oath-curse was customarily dramatized in symbolic rites, the ritual actions portraying the doom that was verbally specified in the self-maledictory oath. An interesting example of such an oath-rite is found in the eighth century B.C. treaty of Ashurnirari V and Mati'îlu:

This ram is not brought from his herd for sacrifice, nor is he brought out for a garitu-festival, nor is he brought out for a kiniitu-festival, nor is he brought out for (a rite for) a sick man, nor is he brought out for slaughter (s...). It is to make the treaty of Ashurnirari, King of Assyria, with Mati'îlu that he is brought out. If Mati'îlu [sins] against the treaty sworn by the gods, just as this ram is brought [here] from his herd and to his herd will not return [and stand] at its head, so may Mati'îlu with his sons, [his nobles,] the people of his land [be brought] far from his land and to his land not return [to stand] at the head of his land.

This head is not the head of a ram; it is the head of Mati'îlu, the head of his sons, his nobles, the people of his land. If those named [sin] against this treaty, as the head of this ram is cut off, his leg put in his mouth [...] so may the head of those named be cut off [...]. This shoulder is not the shoulder of a ram, it is the shoulder of the one named, it is the shoulder of [his sons, his nobles], the people of his land. If Mati'îlu sins against this treaty, as the shoulder of this ram is torn out, [...] so may the

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5 Some of the similes used in prophetic threats of judgment in the Old Testament are found to reflect the formulae recited at these substitution rites depicting the curses of the covenant oath. Cf., e.g., Ps. 37:20; 68:3 (2).
[shoulder of the one named, [his] sons, [his nobles,] the people of [his land] be torn out [. . .]” (col. 1:10 ff.).

Oath-curse was, moreover, practically synonymous with covenant (cf., e.g., Deut. 29:11 (12)) and the substitution rites symbolizing the oath-curse coalesced with the rites which ratified the covenant. In the treaty just cited, for example, it is the ram which is brought out for the explicit purpose of making the treaty that serves at the same time expressly to represent the vassal people suffering the curse of the oath of allegiance sworn by Mati'iu. The ram cut off from the herd never to return, the ram with its head and other members severed, symbolized the curse fate of the covenant breaker. But it was this same cutting off of the ram that made the covenant. The practice of slaying an animal in the ceremony of covenant ratification is widely attested and out of this common rite arose the familiar biblical and extra-biblical terminology of “cutting a covenant” and the synonymous “cutting a curse”.

It is generally recognized that a dismembering ritual like that described in Genesis 15 is to be explained by reference to the complex of concepts and ceremonies we have just described. But here too is the historical-juridical context for the understanding of the vassal covenant of Genesis 17 and, more particularly, for the interpretation of its cutting off rite

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6 The translation is that given in D. J. McCarthy, Treaty and Covenant, Rome, 1936, p. 195.

7 McCarthy (op. cit., pp. 55 ff.) rightly rejects the interpretation that sees in the cutting up of an animal to make a covenant the idea of an association of life effected through the mystic force of the sacrificial blood. He defends the common view that the ceremony is a Drohritus, an enacted curse threat against the swearer of the oath lest he dare violate it.


10 See further below and cf. “Law Covenant”, p. 4.
of circumcision. This means that circumcision was the rite by which the covenant of Genesis 17 was "cut". It means further that circumcision symbolized the oath-curse by which the Abrahamic community confessed themselves under the judicial authority and more precisely under the sword of God Almighty.\footnote{Cf. Josh. 5:13; Rom. 13:4; Rev. 19:15, 16. The Joshua 5 theophany account follows the record of the circumcising of the generation of the wilderness wanderer (Josh. 5:2 ff.). It is as if the sword of the captain of the host of the Lord had been turned away from the uncircumcised nation by their cutting the covenant allegiance oath anew through circumcision and only then could be directed against the Canaanites to cut them off from the land. Cf. Ezek 28:10; 31:18; 32:10 ff. for the association of the death of the uncircumcised with that of the victim of the sword. On this usage in Ezekiel, cf. O. Eissfeldt, "Schwerterschlagene bei Hesekiel" in Studies in Old Testament Prophecy, ed. H. H. Rowley, New York, 1950, pp. 73–81. Cf., too, the cutting off curse of the hypocrite in QQS II, 16, 17 and the appeal made to it by O. Betz to interpret Matthew 24:51 and Acts 1:18 in "The Dichotomized Servant and the End of Judas Iscariot", Revue de Qumran 17, 5 (Oct. 1964), pp. 43–58.}

What is suggested by the broad structure of Genesis 17 is confirmed by the particulars about circumcision given in verses 9–14. Circumcision is called God's covenant, his covenant in the flesh of his people (vv. 9, 10, 13). This identification of covenant with circumcision reminds us at once of the coalescence of the covenant with its oath-curse in the extra-biblical treaties. Moreover, the meaning of circumcision as symbol of the oath-curse is actually expressed in so many words in verse 14. There the threat of the curse sanction sounds against the one who breaks the covenant by not obeying the command of circumcision: "(he) shall be cut off". The use of the verb kārat in this specific description of the curse clearly echoes the idiom of cutting a covenant (kārat b'yit) and it is an unmistakable allusion to the nature of the rite of circumcision. So in this, the primary passage for the interpretation of circumcision, the general and specific considerations unitedly point to the conclusion that circumcision was the sign of the oath-curse of the covenant ratification. In the cutting off of the foreskin the judgment of excision from the covenant relationship was symbolized.\footnote{A more precise analysis of the implications of the circumcision of the foreskin for the curse significance of circumcision will be found below.}

B. Sign of Consecration

The oath whose curse sanction circumcision symbolized was an oath of allegiance. It was an avowal of Yahweh as covenant Lord, a commitment in loyalty to Him. As the symbolized curse which sealed this pledge of allegiance, circumcision partook of the import of the oath. It was, therefore, a sign of consecration. Hence Israel is commanded: "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord" (Jer. 4:4).

Circumcision's consecratory import appears in the figurative use made of the idea in the law of the fruit trees in Leviticus 19:23–25. For the first three years the fruit was regarded as "uncircumcised" and might not be eaten. The fruit of the fourth year was to be consecrated in joyful praise to the Lord and then Israel might eat of the fruit of the fifth year.43 According to this pattern it was the act of consecrating the tree in its firstfruit to the Lord that terminated the state of uncircumcision and so constituted the circumcision of the tree.

For Abraham the consecratory purpose of circumcision was brought home in another cutting ritual he was afterwards called to perform. When Isaac the son of promise was born, Abraham had circumcised him on the eighth day as God had commanded (Gen. 21:4). But later God summoned Abraham to take up the knife again and to perfect Isaac's circumcision by cutting him off altogether from among the living (Gen. 22:1 ff.). The identification of this cutting off of Isaac as "a burnt offering" (v. 2), the form of sacrifice expressive of total consecration, illuminates the meaning of these knife rituals. Circumcision, whether partial or complete, was an act of consecration.

With this demand laid upon Abraham to perfect the circumcision of his son, he was confronted with the dilemma of circumcision-consecration. The son of Adam who would consecrate himself to God in the obedience of covenant service can do so only by passing through the judgment curse which circumcision symbolizes. Isaac must be cut off in death at the altar of God. In the circumcision of the foreskin on the

43 Law #60 of the Code of Hammurapi also specifies the fifth year as that in which the produce of the orchard began to be shared by the owner and gardener.
eighth day he had passed under the judgment knife of God apart from God's altar in a merely symbolic, token act of conditional malediction. But this cutting off of the whole body of Isaac's flesh to be consumed in the fire of the altar of God was a falling under the actual judgment curse. This was an infliction in reality of that curse which was but symbolized by the ordinary circumcision made with hands. How then can there be a realization of the proper purpose of the redemptive covenant administered to Abraham? How can Isaac be consecrated to living service in the favor of God if he must be consecrated in death as an object of divine condemnation? And how can there be a fulfillment of the decree of election if the whole redemptive program aborts here and now in the damnation of Isaac?

The answer to this dilemma began to unfold in an earlier knife rite, or circumcision, in which Abraham had participated. Genesis 15 tells us of a covenant cutting and a theophany which Abraham witnessed amid darkness and horror — the only proper setting for this Old Testament Golgotha. There in the passage of God, in the divided theophanic symbol of smoking furnace and flaming torch between the dismembered creatures, the mystery of the abandonment of the Son of God emerged beforehand. For what Abraham witnessed was the strange self-malediction of the Lord of the covenant who would himself undergo the covenant's curse of cutting asunder rather than fail to lead his servant into the promised fulness of beatitude.

From this knife ceremony Abraham might later elicit the meaning of the cutting rite which God appointed to him as the sign of the covenant in his flesh. And remembering this same divine oath-curse of dismembering, Abraham on the mount of Moriah might more fully comprehend what it meant that God had stayed the knife of judgment in his hand and had showed him Isaac's substitute caught by its horns in the thicket. When the hour of darkness should come, it was the Lord who would himself be Isaac's sacrificial ram. What God had before declared himself ready to do in order to fulfill the covenant promise to Abraham, he now by the ram intimates that he will do — he will himself come under the judgment knife and suffer the curse as a substitute for sinners.

Read together in the light of fulfillment, the three cutting
rituals of Genesis 15, 17, and 22 proclaim the mystery of a divine circumcision — the circumcision of God in the crucifixion of his only-begotten. Paul called it "the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:11). The circumcision of the infant Jesus in obedience to Genesis 17, that partial and symbolic cutting off, corresponded to the ritual of Genesis 15 as a passing of one who was divine under the curse threat of the covenant oath. That was the moment, prophetically chosen, to name him "Jesus". But it was the circumcision of Christ in crucifixion that answered to the burnt-offering of Genesis 22 as a perfecting of circumcision, a "putting off" not merely of a token part but "of the (whole) body of the flesh" (Col. 2:11), not simply a symbolic oath-cursing but a cutting off of "the body of his flesh through death" (Col. 1:22) in accursed darkness and dereliction.

Here then was the direction for faith to look for the solution to the dilemma of circumcision as a sign of consecration. By the demand to slay Isaac, God reminds us that all the ordinary generation of Adam, even Abraham and his promised seed, are covenant breakers and must be consecrated to him by coming to the place of the curse. But beholding the ram on Moriah and God's own oath ritual of dismembering, may not even Old Testament faith have discerned the way of grace, the way of identification with God in his cutting off in the dread darkness, the way that cannot but lead through the curse into blessing, beyond death unto life?" The prophet who later wrote of the messianic Servant that "he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people" (Isa. 53:8b) might have articulated this Old Testament identification faith in some such assurance to the faithful as this: You were cut off with the Servant in circumcision, wherein also you were buried with him, whose grave is appointed with the wicked, and you were also raised with him, for he shall be exalted and divide the spoil with the strong.

That, in any case, is the gospel of circumcision according to Paul. In the Colossians 2 passage already cited Paul affirms the union of the Christian with Christ in his crucifixion-circumcision: "in whom ye were also circumcised with a cir-

24 Cf. Heb. 11:19.
cumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (vv. 11, 12, A.R.V.). That Paul here interprets circumcision as a dying or death is clear from the sequence of ideas: circumcision, burial, resurrection (cf. Rom. 6:3, 4). This is confirmed by the exposition of circumcision as a “putting (or stripping) off”, the latter being in turn synonymous with “putting to death” (Col. 3:5–9). As a death in union with Christ, the representative sin-bearer, in his crucifixion, the Christian’s circumcision-death is an undergoing of the wrath of God against sin, a falling under his sword of judgment. It is a judicial death as the penalty for sin. Yet, to be united with Christ in his death is also to be raised with him whom death could not hold in his resurrection unto justification. So it is that circumcision, which in itself as a symbolic action signifies the sword of the Lord cutting off his false servants, as a sign of the Covenant of Redemption takes on, alongside the import of condemnation, that of justification, the blessing that may come through the curse.

Paul traces this wider import of circumcision beyond justification so as to include regeneration and sanctification. The appropriate expression and inevitable accompaniment of our judicial circumcision-death in Christ is the death of the old man, our dying to the dominion of sin. Paul interprets the circumcision-putting off as such a spiritual transformation, if not in Col. 2:11b. ff., yet clearly so in Col. 3:5–9. The element of subjective, spiritual-moral qualification thus occupies a place in the Pauline doctrine of circumcision as a derivative from the rite’s prior meaning as a sign of the objective curse of the covenant.

13 The noun ἀπεκδόσις, “removal, stripping off”, is used in Col. 2:11 and the verb ἀπεκδόσατο in Col. 2:15. The noun is found only here in Scripture and elsewhere only in dependence on Paul. The verb is found only here and in Col. 3:9, which is, therefore, to be regarded as a further exposition of circumcision.

14 For the equivalence with “crucifying” see also Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20; 5:24; 6:12–15.

15 Note Paul’s juridical development of his theme in Col. 2:13 ff.

16 For a further discussion of the exegesis of this passage see below.
Elsewhere, too, in both the Old and New Testaments the idea appears in the form of demand, declaration, and promise that when the consecration sworn in the circumcision oath is fulfilled in the power of the redemptive principle operative in the covenant, it becomes a matter of heart-consecration in the obedience of love to the covenant Lord. A specific, spiritualized usage developed according to which the redemptively consecrated heart and various other organs of expression for such a heart, like the lips and ears, were spoken of as circumcised. In fact, as touching the righteousness of the law (or the proper purpose of the covenant), Paul warned that the circumcision of the flesh without circumcision of the heart was uncircumcision (Rom. 2:25–29; cf. Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 6:10; 9:24, 25 (25, 26); Acts 7:51; Rom. 4:11; Phil. 3:3).

Conclusions: The theology of circumcision can be summarized in the ideas of malediction, consecration, identification, justification, and spiritual qualification. The ancient rituals of covenant ratification, both biblical and their international parallels, provide the original historical orientation for the interpretation of this ordinance. In this light circumcision is found to be an oath rite and, as such, a pledge of consecration and a symbol of malediction. That is its primary, symbolic significance.

Beyond that, the broader import of circumcision is determined by the specific nature of that covenant of which it is declared to be a sign and especially, since circumcision is a sanction sign, by the peculiar nature of the judgment in which that covenant issues. As for the covenant, it was a law covenant, not a simple guarantee of blessing but an administration of the lordship of God, a covenant therefore which confronted the servant with dual sanctions, curse and blessing. And the carrying out of the sanctions in these oath-ratified covenants was regarded as the rendering of a direct verdict by the God (gods) of the oath, that is, as a trial by ordeal.19

19 According to the ideology of the international treaties the covenant relationship had a religious basis, being established under the sanctions of the gods. Hence the military engagement occasioned by the violation of the treaty was a trial by ordeal, a judgment of the oath deities. Note, for example, in the Tukulti-Ninurta historical epic the account of the
Hence, by circumcision, the sign of the consecratory oath of the Abrahamic Covenant, a man confessed himself to be under the juridical authority of Yahweh and committed himself to the ordeal of his Lord’s judgment for the final verdict on his life. The sign of circumcision thus pointed to the eschatological judicial ordeal with its awful sanctions of eternal weal or woe.

In the case of a covenant with the fallen sons of Adam, their nature as covenant breakers from their youth would seem to preclude any outcome for the divine ordeal other than condemnation. Yet the very fact that God makes a covenant with such subjects reveals that along with justice the principle of redemptive grace is operative here with its totally new and unpredictable possibilities. The covenant is a law covenant but it is a redemptive law covenant. Accordingly, its consummating judgment is a redemptive judgment, the curse of which can be suffered not only (not even properly) by the covenant servant in himself; it may also be undergone by him in the divine Redeemer-Substitute. In the one case the curse is curse and no more; in the other, the curse becomes the way to beatitude. Redemptive judgment thus consists in an execution of the covenant’s dual sanctions in the form of curse and blessing-through-curse. This, therefore, is what circumcision signifies. The original maledictory meaning of circumcision continues throughout the broad spectrum of its meaning, curse being an integral, if penultimate, element even in the judgment of the blessed.

“And it shall come to pass, that in all the land, saith the Lord, two parts therein shall be cut off and die; but the third shall be left therein” (Zech. 13:8). Here the potential symbolized in circumcision is prophetically viewed in its historical actualization as the prophet interprets the future of the victory of the Assyrians over the Babylonians in consequence of the offences of the Babylonian king, Kashtilash, and of the siding of all the gods with Tukulti-Ninurta. See further, McCarthy, op. cit., pp. 92 f.

The blessing is attained through the curse suffered by Christ but it is also true that the blessing is a resultant of Christ’s infliction of the curse on the enemies of the blessed. That is the principle expressed in the eschatological concept of the final decisive conflict between the saints and the Satanic hordes.
covenant as a fulfillment of the malediction invoked at its beginning.

Judgment will befall the covenant community, a time of cutting off. For two-thirds the circumcision-judgment will be unto death. But a third part will be left in whom the consecration pledged in circumcision will be realized according to the proper purpose of redemptive covenant. Of them the Lord says, "It is my people"; and they respond, "The Lord is my God" (v. 9b). Even this destiny, however, is reached only by a passage of this remnant "through the fire" (v. 9a); they too must undergo the ordeal symbolized by circumcision. And Zechariah penetrates yet deeper into the mystery of circumcision when he speaks of God's judgment sword wielded against a God-man: "Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the Lord of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones" (v. 7). Here Old Testament prophecy proclaims the New Testament's deliverance out of the malediction of human circumcision by pointing to the malediction-benediction of the circumcision-resurrection of Christ.²

II. BAPTISM, SIGN OF JUDGMENT

In view of the conclusions we have reached concerning circumcision we are bound to ask ourselves whether traditional approaches to Christian baptism may not have unduly restricted its import too. According to Reformed theology, baptism is a sacramental seal of the benefits of Christ's grace, a sign of union with the triune God and of those judicial and spiritual blessings that are secured in Christ. But this theology, appealing (rightly) to the unity of the divine covenants, has maintained that the significance of baptism corresponds to that of circumcision. Does then the New Testament encourage, or even clearly require us to interpret baptism, not exclusively as a sign of blessing, but, like circumcision, as a sign of Christ's redemptive judgment with its benedictions and maledictions alike? Must we enlarge our theology of baptism so as to see in it a more comprehensive symbol of the


What follows is not a general survey of the New Testament teaching concerning baptism. The emphasis will be one-sided because our purpose is simply to call attention to what we believe to be a neglected element in the meaning of this ordinance of Christ. Although silence is not then to be construed necessarily as rejection of other aspects of the matter, it may be acknowledged at once that the incorporation of the new element would seem to require a change in the total bearing and the central thrust of the traditional doctrine of baptism.

\section{A. The Baptism of John}

However the precise relationship between the baptism administered by John the Forerunner and that of the Christian church is to be defined, the significance of the earlier rite naturally entered into the apostolic conception of baptism as ordained for them by the Lord Jesus. John indeed compared his ministry and that of Jesus explicitly in terms of baptism (Matt. 3:11, 12). It is, therefore, important to observe that in the revelation associated with John, baptism is emphatically a sign of eschatological judgment.

\subsection{1. Messenger of Ultimatum}

In order to see the mission of John the Forerunner in proper historical perspective it will be useful to review certain procedures followed in ancient covenant administration. When a vassal failed to satisfy the obligations of the sworn treaty, the suzerain instituted a covenant lawsuit against him. The legal process was conducted by messengers. In the first of its two distinct phases messengers delivered one or more warnings. These were couched in a form that reflected the pattern of
the original treaty. Stylistically, interrogation was a distinctive feature. The vassal was reminded of the suzerain’s benefits and of the treaty stipulations, explanation of his offences was demanded, and he was admonished to mend his ways. He was also confronted anew with the curses of the covenant, now in the form of an ultimatum, and warned of the vanity of all hope of escape through recourse to any alien quarter. If the messenger of the great king was rejected, imprisoned, and especially if he was killed, the legal process moved into its next phase. This was the declaration of war as an execution of the sacred sanctions of the treaty, and so as a visitation of the oath deities against the offender, a trial by ordeal.\footnote{On this legal process see Julien Harvey, “Le 'Rlt-Pattern', réquisitoire prophétique sur la rupture de l'alliance", \textit{Biblica} 43 (1962) 2, pp. 172–196. \textit{Cf.} my \textit{TGK}, p. 139. Since the ways of the gods were portrayed after human analogues, it is not surprising to find evidence of such legal procedure in mythological texts as well as in historical-legal documents. There is, for example, the episode in the Ugaritic epic of Baal (Gordon \textit{UH} 137) where the god Yamm sends his messenger-witnesses (\textit{mlk ym t'dt tpt nhr}) with an ultimatum to the assembly of the gods. The messengers address them in the name of Yamm, “your lord” and “your master” (\textit{b'Ikm adnkrm}), while the terror stricken gods are acknowledged by El as “thy tributaries” (\textit{mnykyk}) and Yamm is promised his “tribute” (\textit{argmn}; compare the use of this term in the account of Niqm\textit{d}’s tribute to his Hittite suzerain, Shuppiluliuma in Gordon \textit{UH} 118:18,24). Significantly, it is narrated that Baal was on the verge of slaying the messengers. Such a rejection of the ultimatum would have challenged Yamm to enter the second stage of his lawsuit. And, of course, as it falls out, the case is determined in a trial by ordeal through individual combat, Baal vanquishing the Sea-dragon and securing for himself the eternal dominion.} \footnote{See Matt. 21:33 ff.; Mk. 12:1 ff.; Lk. 20:9 ff.}

The mission of the Old Testament prophets, those messengers of Yahweh to enforce the covenant mediated to Israel through Moses, is surely to be understood within the judicial framework of the covenant lawsuit. So too the mission of John the Baptist. John was sent with the word of ultimatum from Yahweh to his covenant violating vassal, Israel.

Was it not precisely this judicial process that Jesus had in mind when he interpreted the succession of divine messengers in the parable of the vineyard? The servants of the parable were sent by the “lord of the vineyard” to demand for him his
due. But the husbandmen repudiated their obligations, handled the messengers shamefully, beat them, stoned them, sent them away empty, even killed some of them. That the rejection of John was particularly in view in this parable is indicated by its location immediately after the record of Jesus' counter-challenge to the Jewish authorities with respect to the origin of John's baptism. And Jesus himself was of course the lord of the vineyard's son, who was cast out and slain. Because Israel had repudiated his lordship and despised his ultimatum, God would inflict on them the vengeance of the covenant. In fact, Jesus, as the final messenger of the covenant, was declaring the verdict against Israel in the very process of speaking unto them this parable.

It is possible to discern reflections of the ancient covenant lawsuit paradigm in these words of Jesus. Parabolic though it is in form, this discourse was part of a legal conflict of Jesus with the officialdom of Israel over the precise subject of covenant authority. The parable served to remind them of the benefits bestowed by the Lord of the covenant: he had planted the vineyard, hedged it about, digged the winepress, and built the tower. The parable also confronted the vassals with the treaty stipulations and their disloyalty in failing to present their tribute at the appointed season. Nor is the interrogative element missing; it was by a question that Jesus elicited from the recalcitrants themselves their own verdict of destruction and disinheritance. And the whole discourse issued in a solemn decree of judgment.

58 For supplementation of the announcement of destruction, see the parable of the marriage of the King's son which follows immediately in Matthew (22:2 ff.).
60 Cf. Matt. 21:40,41.
61 Cf. Matt. 21:42 f.; Mk. 12:10 f.; Lk. 20:17 f. Also structured according to the pattern of the covenant lawsuit is the song of the vineyard in Isa. 5:1 ff., on which our Lord's parable is an evident variation. The judicial character of the song is plainly indicated by Yahweh's summons: "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard" (v. 3). The parallel between this song and Jesus' parable thus penetrates beyond the common figure of the vineyard to a common covenantal crisis and judicial process.
To the same effect had been Malachi's prophetic interpretation of the coming Lord and his Forerunner; he too depicted them as the bearers of the ultimatum and the final verdict. For Malachi spoke of two messengers, the one called "my [i. e., the Lord's] messenger" and the other, "the messenger of the covenant" (Mal. 3:1). Of the first he wrote: "he shall prepare the way before me". 30 Again, Malachi spoke of a coming of "Elijah" (i. e., John) 31 as a precursor of "the great and terrible day of the Lord". His mission was to be one of warning lest Israel's Lord smite them "with a curse" (Mal. 3:23, 24 (4:5, 6) ). For at his fiery advent the Lord would refine his people by judgment (cf. Mal. 3:2 ff.). 32

What is narrated in the Gospels concerning the ministry of John comports fully with the understanding of his role as that of messenger of the covenant to declare the Lord's ultimatum of eschatological judgment. The voice in the wilderness cried, "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). It warned of "the wrath to come" and of the vanity of reliance on external earthly relationships, even descent from Abraham. If the trees did not bring forth satisfactory fruit, if they were not properly circumsiced unto the Lord (cf. Lev. 19:23–25), then they must be cursed as a cumbrance to the ground and cut off. The axe was even now "laid unto the root" to inflict this judgment of circumcision. 33

30 A similar figure is used in the Nimrud treaty of Esarhaddon to describe the vassal's obligation to accept the lordship of the crown prince Ashurbanipal when the time of his accession to the throne had come: "You will set a fair path at his feet" (line 54, translation of D. J. Wiseman in The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon, London, 1958, p. 34). The same demand expressed in the same imagery was attributed by Isaiah (40:3) to the voice that should cry in the wilderness, the voice with which John identified himself (Jn. 1:23; cf. Matt. 3:3; Mk. 1:3; Lk. 3:4). On the use and importance of Isaiah 40:3 in the Qumran community (cf. IQS viii, 13, 14) see W. H. Brownlee, The Meaning of the Qumran Scrolls for the Bible, New York, 1964, pp. 83 ff., 110 ff.

31 Cf. Matt. 11:14; 17:12, 13; Mk. 9:12, 13; Lk. 1:17.

32 Malachi's own role as a messenger of the covenant lawsuit, already suggested by his name and manifest in the whole tenor of his message, is epitomized in his closing words (3:22–24 (4:4–6) ) as he recalls the covenant transaction at Horeb and directs Israel's attention to the threatening eschatological curse.

One would expect that the baptism of John as the sign of such a mission of ultimatum would portray by its own symbolic form the threatened ordeal of divine judgment. Of course, in the usually alleged ritual antecedents of John's baptism (viz., the Levitical lustrations, proselyte baptism, the Qumran washings) and frequently in the figurative use of water in the prophets it is the cleansing property of water that is in view. Moreover, John's baptism is called a "baptism of repentance unto the remission of sins" (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3). Consequently, the baptismal waters of John have been understood as symbolic of a washing away of the uncleanness of sin. But the possibility must be probed whether this water rite did not dramatize more plainly and pointedly the dominant theme in John's proclamation (particularly in the earlier stage before the baptism of Jesus), namely, the impending judicial ordeal which would discriminate and separate between the chaff and the wheat, rendering a verdict of acceptance but also of rejection. The fact is that for such an interpretation of the rite there is ample biblical-historical justification.

2. Symbolic Water Ordeal

Apel to the gods for judicial decision was a standard feature in ancient legal procedure. Varieties of trial by ordeal ranged all the way from the oath of the individual sworn under sanctions to be executed by the oath deities to international wars in settlement of covenant controversy, the disposition of the conflict being again the decision of the oath gods invoked in the treaties. The most graphic example of the ordeal technique in Israelite judicial practice was the jealousy ordeal prescribed in Numbers 5. A more familiar variety of ordeal was the drawing of lots to expose the guilty. But apart from prescribed court procedure the principle of ordeal comes to expression in every judicial intervention of God in history.

The two common elemental forces that functioned as ordeal

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34 Cf., e.g., Ezek. 36:25; Zech. 13:1.
35 E.g., Jos. 7:14; Jon. 1:7. According to one theory, the terms Urim and Thummim derive respectively from roots meaning "curse" and "be perfect". The objects so designated would then serve as ordeal devices, rendering one or the other verdicts indicated by their names.
powers were water and fire. So it is too, as Peter observes, in cosmic history. God’s judgment of the ancient world was by water and the day of judgment awaiting the present heaven and earth will be an ordeal by fire.\textsuperscript{56}

The water ordeal was long current in the ancient Near East. It was practised throughout the Mesopotamian world and it is attested as early as the earliest known law code, that of the Sumerian Ur-Nammu.

Illustrative is the case dealt with in the second law of Hammurapi’s Code. The accused was required to cast himself into the river. The word used for river in this law is preceded by the determinative for deity. The concept was, therefore, that the accused was casting himself into the hands of the divine judge who would declare the verdict. Emergence from the divine waters of ordeal would signify vindication: “If the River shows that man to be innocent and he comes forth safe”, he shall dispossess his false accuser and the latter shall be put to death. But, “if the River overpowers him, his accuser shall take possession of his estate”.\textsuperscript{57}

Archetype of water ordeals was the Noahic deluge. The main features of the subsequent divine-river trials were all found in the judgment of the Flood: the direct revelation of divine verdict, the use of water as the ordeal element, the overpowering of the condemned and the deliverance of the justified, and the entrance of the ark-saved heirs of the new world into the possession of the erstwhile estates of the ungodly.

The other outstanding water ordeals of Old Testament history were those through which Moses and Joshua led Israel at the Red Sea and the Jordan. These too were acts of redemptive judgment wherein God vindicated the cause of those who called upon his name and condemned their adversaries. The exodus ordeal, with Israel coming forth safe and the Egyptians overwhelmed in the depths, strikingly exemplified the dual potential of the ordeal process. In the Jordan

\textsuperscript{56} See II Pet. 3:5-7.

\textsuperscript{57} That a similar river ordeal was practised in the Ugarit area seems to be indicated by the use in Ugaritic mythology of the epithet “Judge River” for the god Yamm (Sea). \textit{Cf.} C. H. Gordon, \textit{Ugaritic Literature}, Rome, 1949, p. 11, n. 1.
ordeal, the dispossession of the condemned by the acquitted was prominent. At that historical juncture the rightful ownership of Canaan was precisely the legal issue at stake and God declared in favor of Israel by delivering them from Jordan's overflowing torrents. Thereby Israel's contemplated conquest of the land was vindicated as a holy war, a judgment of God. And the melting hearts of the Amorite and Canaanite kings, who grasped the legal significance of the episode as a divine verdict against them, was the inevitable psychological result (which would contribute in turn to the fulfillment of the verdict) in a culture where, even if superstitiously, the reality of the sacred ordeal was accepted.38

Since, then, the most memorable divine judgments of all covenant history had been trials by water ordeal and since John was sent to deliver the ultimatum of divine judgment, it does not appear too bold an interpretation of the baptismal sign of his mission to see in it a symbolic water ordeal, a dramatic enactment of the imminent messianic judgment. In such a visualization of the coming judgment John will have been resuming the prophetic tradition of picturing the messianic mission as a second Red Sea judgment (and so as a water ordeal).39

Indeed, read again in the light of the history of covenant ordeals, the whole record of John's ministry points to the understanding of his water rite as an ordeal sign rather than as a mere ceremonial bath of purification. The description of John's baptism as "unto the remission of sins", which is usually regarded as suggesting the idea of spiritual cleansing, is even more compatible with the forensic conception of a verdict of acquittal rendered in a judicial ordeal. The time had come when here in the Jordan River, where once Yahweh had declared through an ordeal that the promised land belonged to Israel, he was requiring the Israelites to confess their forfeiture of the blessings of his kingdom and their liability to the wrath to come. Yet John's proclamation was a preaching of "good tidings" to the people (Lk. 3:18) because

38 See Josh. 5:1; cf. 2:10, 11; Exod. 15:13 ff. The legal pattern of a trial by ordeal with its judicial cutting off and inheritance of land is pervasive in Psalm 37 (see esp. vv. 9 ff., 22, 33 f.).
39 See e. g. Isa. 11:10-16 (cf. 27:1, 12, 13; 51:10, 11); Zech. 10:10, 11.
it invited the repentant to anticipate the messianic judgment in a symbolic ordeal in the Jordan, so securing for themselves beforehand a verdict of remission of sin against the coming judgment. To seal a holy remnant by baptism unto the messianic kingdom was the proper purpose of the bearer of the ultimatum of the great King.

Further support for the interpretation of a baptismal rite as a sign of ordeal is found in the biblical use of βαπτίζω (and βάπτισμα) to denote historic ordeals.40 Paul described Israel's Red Sea ordeal as a being baptized (I Cor. 10:2) and Peter in effect calls the Noahic deluge ordeal a baptism (I Pet. 3:21). To these passages we shall want to return. But of particular relevance at this point is the fact that John the Baptist himself used the verb βαπτίζω for the impending ordeal in which the One mightier than he would wield his winnowing fork to separate from the covenant kingdom those whose circumcision had by want of Abrahamic faith become uncircumcision and who must therefore be cut off from the congregation of Israel and devoted to unquenchable flames. With reference to this judicially discriminating ordeal with its dual destinies of garner and Gehenna John declared: "He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire" (Matt. 3:11 f.; Lk. 3:16 f.; cf. Mk. 1:8).41

40 Our concern here is not with the metaphorical use of βαπτίζω in the sense of "overwhelm" (as in debts) but with the semantic development along the line of its technical religious usage.

41 One of the Qumran hymns (IQS, 3:28 ff.) depicts an eschatological river of fire, "the torrents of Belial", and it has been suggested that possibly John had this in mind when he spoke of Jesus baptizing with fire. Some would trace this image to Persian eschatology, which speaks of a river of molten metal through which all men must pass and in the ordeal process be either purified or destroyed. (Cf. W. H. Brownlee, "John the Baptist in the New Light of Ancient Scrolls", in The Scrolls and the New Testament, ed. Krister Stendahl, New York, 1957, p. 42.) For the background of John's thought, however, we must remember that fire was along with water a traditional ancient ordeal element. In fact, in the very prophecy where the Old Testament delineates the mission of the Lord and his Forerunner as final messengers of the covenant lawsuit, the messianic judgment is portrayed as an ordeal by fire with dual effects. For evildoers the fire of that day is the burning of an oven to consume them, but for those who fear God's name it is the healing rays of the sun to refine them (Mal. 3:19, 20 (4:1, 2); cf. 3:2, 3). And in connection with
More than that, John instituted a comparison between his own baptismal rite and the baptismal ordeal to be executed by the coming One: "I indeed baptize you with water...he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire". John called attention to the great difference; his own baptism was only a symbol whereas the coming One would baptize men in an actual ordeal with the very elements of divine power. But the significant fact at present is not that John's baptism was only a symbol but that, according to his own exposition of it, what John's baptism symbolized was the coming messianic judgment. That is certainly the force of his double use of "baptize" in this comparison.

Jesus' reception of John's baptism can be more easily understood on this approach. As covenant Servant, Jesus submitted in symbol to the judgment of the God of the covenant in the waters of baptism. The event appropriately concluded with a divine verdict, the verdict of justification expressed by the heavenly voice and sealed by the Spirit's anointing, Messiah's earnest of the kingdom inheritance (Matt. 3:16, 17; Mk. 1:10, 11; Lk. 3:22; cf. Jn. 1:32, 33; Ps. 2:7 f.). For Jesus, as the Lamb of God, to submit to the symbol of judgment was to offer himself up to the curse of the covenant. By his baptism Jesus was consecrating himself unto his sacrificial death in the judicial ordeal of the Cross. Such an understanding of his

the idea of a river of judgment fire, Daniel 7:9, 10 is of interest. From the throne of the Ancient of Days as he sits for judgment there issues a fiery stream. By it the horn making great kingdom claims is consumed (vv. 11, 26), while the kingdom taken from him is given to the vindicated saints of the Most High as an eternal possession (vv. 26, 27). The total structure of the passage thus follows the pattern of a judicial ordeal. Compare also the delivering-destroying heavenly fire and the lake of fire and brimstone in Rev. 20:9 ff. See too our remarks on I Cor. 10:1 ff. below.

Satan contested the verdict of sonship and that led to the ordeal by combat between Jesus and Satan, beginning with the wilderness temptation immediately after Jesus' baptism and culminating in the crucifixion and resurrection-vindication of the victorious Christ, the prelude to his reception of all the kingdoms of the world (the issue under dispute in the ordeal; cf. esp. Matt. 4:8 ff.; Lk. 4:5 ff.). See further the discussion of Col. 2:11 ff. below. Cf. Rom. 1:4.

Agreeably, the heavenly verdict identifies Jesus as the Servant of Isaiah's songs (cf. Isa. 42:1), the one who must be led as a lamb to the
baptism is reflected in Jesus' own reference to his coming passion as a baptism: "I have a baptism to be baptized with" (Lk. 12:50; cf. Mk. 10:38).  

Further background for Jesus' conceptualizing of his sufferings as a water ordeal (and at the same time an additional antecedent for John's introduction of a water rite symbolic of judicial ordeal) is found in those supplicatory Psalms in which the righteous servant pleads for deliverance from overwhelming waters. Of particular interest is Psalm 69, from which the New Testament draws so deeply in its explication of the judicial sufferings of Christ: "I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me... Let not the waterflood overflow me, neither let the deep swallow me up" (vv. 2b, 15a; cf. vv. 1, 2a, 14). The currency of this imagery in the days of John and Jesus is attested by the Qumran hymns. The ultimate judicial origin of the figure in the literal practice of trial by water is evidenced by the judicial atmosphere and structuring of Psalms in which it appears. The supplicant pleads in the language of the law court. Against the lying accusations of his adversaries he protests his innocence and appeals for a manifestation of divine justice, that is, for deliverance out of his ordeal. The supplicant Jonah found it possible to make literal use of this terminology of water ordeal in his appeal from the depths, and Jesus saw in Jonah's trial

slaughter and have laid upon him the iniquities of all his people. Cf. in this connection the comments of Cullmann (Baptism in the New Testament, Chicago, 1950, pp. 20 f.) on the Baptist's testimony in John 1:29–34.

In the context of that statement Jesus seems to allude in other ways too to the Forerunner's witness to him. He says that his mission is one of casting fire on the earth (Lk. 12:49; cf. Matt. 3:11; Lk. 3:16) and that it will result in a division among men (Lk. 12:51 ff.; cf. Matt. 3:12; Lk. 3:17).

See also Pss. 18:16, 17 (15, 16); 42:8 (7); cf. 68:23 (22); 124:4, 5; 144:7.

45 See, e.g., IQH 3:19 ff.; 5 (pervasively); 6:22 ff., cf. 32 ff.

46 Note, for example, Pss. 18:7 (6), (cf. I Kg. 8:31 f.), 21–25 (20–24); 43:1 (viewed as part of a single complex comprising Pss. 42 and 43); 69 (throughout, considered particularly in its messianic realization). Of interest here are the form critical views of H. Schmidt concerning the so-called individual laments and especially the identity of the enemies of the Psalmist.
by water the sign of his own judgment ordeal in the heart of the earth.\footnote{Jon. 2:2 ff. (1 ff.); Matt. 12:39, 40.}

Synonymous with the motif of the ordeal by water is that of ordeal by combat with sea-monsters. Thus, the Red Sea water ordeal becomes in certain Old Testament passages a conflict of Yahweh against Leviathan.\footnote{Pss. 74:12–15; 89:10, 11 (9, 10); Isa. 51:9, 10. We are thereby reminded that the Lord was present with his people in the passage through the sea, that he underwent their ordeal, and that their salvation depended on their identification with him.} Then in the New Testament there is a typological application of this imagery to Jesus' conflict with Satan in the course of his humiliation unto death.\footnote{See especially Revelation 12, which symbolizes the Satanic enmity as both dragon and flood. Note the points of contact between this vision and IQH 5. Cf. footnote 42 above.} Hence, on our understanding of John's baptism in general and of his baptism of Jesus in particular, Jesus' experience in the Jordan would have been a symbolic anticipation of his ensuing victorious combat with the Satanic-Dragon. We cannot, therefore, but view with new appreciation the liturgies of the ancient church when they speak of Jesus crushing the head of the dragon in his descent into the river for baptism.\footnote{Cf. Per Lundberg, \textit{La typologie baptismale dans l'ancienne Église}, Leipzig and Uppsala, 1942, pp. 10 ff., 225 ff., 229 ff. Early baptismal prayers recited the Lord's supernatural way in the waters in events like creation, the deluge, and the Red Sea and Jordan crossings. Singularly apposite is the anchoring of God's redemptive acts of subduing and dividing the ordeal waves in his creation acts of dividing and bounding the chaos waters in order that the dry land, inheritance of man, might appear. (It may be recalled here that in ancient mythology the slaying of the chaos dragon is the necessary preliminary to the establishment of the world order.) There is indeed an allegorical strain in these ancient prayers, but they did achieve a live sense of identification with the eschatological current of redemptive history, something our denatured modern baptismal forms would do well to recapture.}

\textbf{Conclusions:} John the Baptist was sent as a messenger of the Old Covenant to its final generation. His concern was not to prepare the world at large for the coming of Christ but to summon Israel unto the Lord to whom they had sworn allegiance at Sinai, ere his wrath broke upon them and the
Mosaic kingdom was terminated in the flames of messianic judgment. The demand which John brought to Israel was focused in his call to baptism. This baptism was not an ordinance to be observed by Israel in their generations but a special sign for that terminal generation epitomizing the particular crisis in covenant history represented by the mission of John as messenger of the Lord's ultimatum.

From the angle of repentance and faith, John's ultimatum could be seen as a gracious invitation to the marriage feast of the Suzerain's Son; and John's baptism, as a seal of the remission of sins. Bright with promise in this regard was Jesus' submission to John's baptism. For the passing of Jesus through the divine judgment in the water rite in the Jordan meant to John's baptism what the passing of Yahweh through the curse of the knife rite of Genesis 15 meant to Abraham's circumcision. In each case the divine action constituted an invitation to all recipients of these covenant signs of consecration to identify themselves by faith with the Lord himself in their passage through the ordeal. So they might be assured of emerging from the overwhelming curse with a blessing. Jesus' passage through the water ordeal with the others who were baptized in the Jordan was also one in meaning with the Lord's presence with Israel in the theophany pillar during the passage through the Red Sea, and in the ark of the covenant during their crossing of the Jordan. And the meaning of all these acts of the Lord of the covenant is expressed in the promise: "But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour" (Isa. 43:1-3a).

Viewed from a more comprehensive vantage point, John's baptism was a sign of the ordeal through which Israel must

Notice the cursing of the curse in these episodes where the ordeal waters themselves become the objects of the circumcision curse of division and cutting off.
pass to receive a judgment of either curse or blessing, for it represented the demand of a suzerainty-law covenant, an engagement sealed by dual sanctions.\textsuperscript{53} The actual judgment, experienced by that generation to which John was sent, was an ordeal unto the cursing and casting off of Israel, a remnant only being excepted.\textsuperscript{54} The city and the sanctuary were destroyed and the end thereof was with a flood, a pouring out of desolation.\textsuperscript{55} To this overflowing wrath the waters of John’s baptism had pointed, as well as to the remission of sins received by the remnant according to the election of grace.

By his message and baptism John thus proclaimed again to the seed of Abraham the meaning of their circumcision. Circumcision was no guarantee of inviolable privilege. It was a sign of the divine ordeal in which the axe, laid unto the roots of the unfruitful trees cursed by Messiah, would cut them off.\textsuperscript{56} John’s baptism was in effect a re-circumcising.

\textit{(to be concluded)}

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\textsuperscript{53} See “Law Covenant”, pp. 11 ff.
\textsuperscript{54} Cf. Rom. 11.
\textsuperscript{55} Cf. Dan. 9:26, 27.
\textsuperscript{56} Matt. 3:10; Lk. 3:9.
OATH AND ORDEAL SIGNS

SECOND ARTICLE

MEREDITH G. KLINE

B. Christian Baptism

ONE of the links between Christian and Johannine baptism is the baptism which Jesus authorized and his disciples administered during the very period of John’s preaching and baptizing.\textsuperscript{57} The key to the meaning of that early dominical baptism and to the enigma of its apparently abrupt cessation is to be found in the significance of the role of John and of Jesus as messengers of the covenant lawsuit.\textsuperscript{58}

When Jesus began his public ministry, God’s lawsuit with Israel was in the ultimatum stage. At this point, the judicial function of Jesus coincided with that of John. Jesus’ witness had the effect of confirming John’s witness of final warning to Israel, especially to Israel’s officialdom in the Judean area. And since the meaning of the baptismal rite administered by these messengers of the covenant derived from the official nature of their mission, the import of Jesus’ baptism, though separately conducted, would also be essentially the same as John’s. Thus, as a sign of the covenant lawsuit against Israel, the baptismal rite of Jesus was, like John’s, a symbol of the imminent judgment ordeal of the people of the Old Covenant.

This interpretation of Jesus’ early baptizing in terms of the concurrent ultimatum mission of John is strikingly confirmed by the evident cessation of that baptism once John was imprisoned. By suffering the voice in the wilderness to

\textsuperscript{57} John 3:22; 4:1 f.
\textsuperscript{58} Cf. above, \textit{W. Th.} \textit{J. XXVII}, 2, pp. 127 ff. See G. R. Beasley-Murray, \textit{Baptism in the New Testament}, London, 1963, pp. 67 ff. for a survey of treatments of these questions. He comments, “If Jesus did refrain from letting His disciples baptize in the later ministry, we have to admit that the reason is shrouded in uncertainty” (p. 70).
be silenced, the Lord of the covenant concluded the ultimatum stage in his lawsuit against Israel, judging that Israel's responsible representatives had by now decisively rejected his warning. The profound satisfaction which the defiant rulers must have registered at John's imprisonment was, it would seem, the final, intolerable expression of their contempt for the heavenly authority in which John had come to them (cf. Matt. 21:23 ff.; Mk. 11:22 ff.; Lk. 20:1 ff.). Hence, the imprisonment of John was the signal for the departure of Jesus to Galilee. The form of presentation in the Gospels, particularly in Matthew and Mark, is such as to call attention to the fact that it was the imprisonment of John that prompted Jesus to initiate the new ministry in Galilee, whose epochal nature the Synoptics are clearly concerned to impress on us.\(^59\) Thus, implicitly, the Gospels trace to John's imprisonment the ending of the early Judean ministry of Jesus with its particular baptismal rite. That is, they implicitly connect the cessation of Jesus' early baptism with the termination of the ultimatum stage in the covenant lawsuit against Israel.\(^60\)

In brief then, the early baptism authorized by Jesus was a sign of God's ultimatum to Israel. When that ultimatum was emphatically rejected, a new phase in the administration of the covenant was entered, Jesus' ministry of baptism ceasing along with the Johannine message of ultimatum which it had sealed.

The difference between the earlier and the later baptisms authorized by Jesus was the difference between two quite distinct periods in the history of the Covenant. The later baptism was of course ordained as a sign of the New Covenant;

\(^59\) Matt. 4:12 ff.; Mk. 1:14 f.; cf. Lk. 4:14; Jn. 4:1–3; Acts 10:37. The Synoptics begin here to record the teaching of Jesus with its announcement that now the time was fulfilled and the kingdom at hand (Matt. 4:17; Mk. 1:15), and with its heralding, in the Nazareth synagogue, of the arrival of the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk. 4:19, 21).

\(^60\) John's Gospel indicates that the concluding of the Judean ministry and the new beginning in Galilee were attributable to a hostile reaction of the Pharisees to Jesus himself (4:1). The response to the ultimatum of the two messengers of the covenant would naturally be similar. His royal summons spurned by Israel's hierarchical powers, Jesus turned to the task of calling the remnant out of the shepherdless flock and thereby saving them from the now certain judgment (cf. Zech. 11).
it was no part of the old lawsuit against Israel. Nevertheless, this new water baptism, appearing so soon after the other and still within the personal ministry of Jesus, would hardly bear a meaning altogether different from the earlier one. There would be a pronounced continuity between Christian baptism and the earlier, Johannine baptism. While, therefore, the baptismal ordinance which Christ appointed to his church would have a significance appropriate to the now universal character of the covenant community and to its new eschatological metaphysic, it would continue to be a sign of consecration to the Lord of the covenant and, more particularly, a symbolic passage through the judicial ordeal, in which those under the rule of the covenant receive a definitive verdict for eternal glory or for perpetual desolation. This is borne out by the New Testament evidence.

1. Baptism as Ordeal

That Peter conceived of Christian baptism as a sign of judicial ordeal is indicated by his likening it to the archetypal water ordeal, the Noahic deluge (I Pet. 3:20–22). In this passage, ἀντίτυπον (v. 21) is best taken with βάπτισμα, in which case Christian baptism is directly designated as the antitype of the ordeal waters of the deluge, or of the passage through those waters. But even if ἀντίτυπον were connected with ὅμοιος so that the church would be called the antitype of the Noahic family, the total comparison drawn by Peter would still involve an interpretation of the baptismal waters in terms of the significance of the deluge ordeal.

With respect to the interpretation of the deluge—"baptism" as a judicial ordeal, we would observe that that understanding of it opens the way for a satisfactory carrying through of what would seem the most straightforward approach to these difficult verses. For the most natural assumption is certainly

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61 It is a question of whether the relative pronoun ὁ at the beginning of verse 21 refers to the immediately preceding δι' ὑδάτως (understood instrumentally) or to the more general idea of verse 20 (the δι' ὑδάτως then being understood locally). The acceptance of the textual variant ὁ would not affect this choice; it would make it possible to take the Νῶς of verse 20 as the antecedent.
that Peter was led to bring the deluge and the rite of baptism together because of the common element of the waters. And surely then that exegesis will most commend itself which succeeds in maintaining a genuine parallel between the role played by the waters in the two cases. Since, therefore, a saving function is predicated of the waters of baptism (v. 21), the waters should also figure as a means of salvation in the deluge episode (v. 20). That is, the problematic δι᾽ ὄδαρος should be construed in the instrumental sense. This can be done, and without the tortuous explanations required by the usual forms of this approach, once it is recognized that the flood waters were the ordeal instrument by which God justified Noah. It may be natural to think of the flood waters as merely destructive, as something from which to be saved. But those waters may in precisely the same and obvious sense be the means of condemnation-destruction or of justification-salvation, if they are seen to be the waters of a judicial ordeal with its potential of dual divine verdicts.

According to another suggestion, Peter meant that the flood waters saved Noah by delivering him from the evil of man (cf. II Pet. 2:5, 7). A similar aspect of Christian baptism is then found in Peter's baptismal call to the Israelites on Pentecost to save themselves from their crooked generation (Acts 2:40 f.). It might also be observed that the extrication of the righteous from their persecution by the ungodly is characteristic of redemptive judgments and that the oppressive violence practised by the pre-diluvian kings figures prominently in the introduction to the flood record. Nevertheless, a forensic interpretation of the salvation referred to in I Pet. 3:20 is preferable since the judicial relationship of God to man is a more prominent aspect of both biblical soteriology and the symbolism of baptism. Moreover, Peter proceeds

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46 The author of Hebrews also interpreted the deluge in the terms of the ordeal paradigm: righteousness, condemnation, inheritance (see Heb. 11:7).

47 See Bo Reicke, The Anchor Bible: The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude, New York, 1964, p. 113.


49 Also, Acts 2:40 f. is better understood as a call to escape from that crooked generation regarded as the target of threatening divine wrath.
immediately to develop the idea of salvation, as signified in baptism, the counterpart to the flood, in specifically forensic terms (see vv. 21b, 22).

That which signalized salvation was not, says Peter, the mere putting away of the filth of the flesh incidental to a water rite. It was rather the good conscience of the baptized (v. 21b). Now conscience has to do with accusing and excusing; it is forensic. Baptism then is concerned with man in the presence of God's judgment throne. This conclusion remains undisturbed whatever the precise exegesis of the relevant phrase. The ἐπερώτημα seems best understood as a pledge (a meaning well attested in judicial texts), the solemn vow of consecration given in answer to the introductory questions put to the candidate for baptism. In ancient covenant procedure, as has been observed above, such an oath of allegiance was accompanied by rites symbolizing the ordeal sanctions of the covenant. If ἐπερώτημα were taken as an appeal, either the appeal of a good conscience to God or the appeal to God for a good conscience, it would refer to the prayer uttered in prospect of the divine ordeal.64 There is a further heightening of the juridical emphasis in this passage in Peter's reference to the actual saving act with respect to which baptism serves as a symbolic means of grace (vv. 21c, 22). The salvation figured forth in baptism is that accomplished in the judgment of Christ, which issued in his resurrection. The motif of ordeal by combat is introduced by the allusion to Christ's subjugation of angels, authorities, and powers.65 Thus the total context of Peter's thought con-

Note the similarities to the terminology and message of John the Baptist (cf. Lk. 3:5 ff.).

64 Cf. further E. G. Selwyn, The First Epistle of Peter, London, 1946, pp. 205 f.; Bo Reicke, op. cit., pp. 114 f. and The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism, Copenhagen, 1946, pp. 182 ff. Reicke maintains that in this epistle σωτήριος does not mean "conscience" but "consent" or "positive attitude". In 3:21 he translates: "a pledge of good will to God", that is, a promise of loyalty. By placing baptism in the context of an oath of allegiance this exegesis too is favorable to the interpretation of baptism as an ordeal ritual.

65 Cf. below on Col. 2:11 f. On the early church's association of baptism with the deluge and of both with the overcoming of the demonic powers of the Abyss, see Lundberg, op. cit., pp. 73 ff.
carning baptism supports the conclusion we have drawn from his comparison of baptism to the deluge, namely, that he conceived of this sacrament as a sign of judicial ordeal.

Paul saw the nature of baptism displayed in another classic Old Testament water ordeal. In I Cor. 10:1 ff. the apostle recalls that the Mosaic generation of Israel participated in events that corresponded in religious significance to the church's sacramental ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Yet, in spite of experiencing the sacramental privileges of the Mosaic Covenant, most of that generation fell beneath its curses because of defection from its sworn allegiance to Yahweh. Therein was a message for the church which Paul proceeded to apply. Our present interest, however, is in verse 2: "(they) were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea".

As was observed previously, the passage through the Red Sea had the character of a judicial ordeal by which Israel was vindicated and Egypt doomed. It was an ordeal by water and by fire, the two elemental ordeal powers. The water needs no further explanation; perhaps the fire does.

In his theophanic embodiment in the pillar of smoke and fire, Yahweh, himself a consuming fire, was present in judgment. Through the fiery judgment pillar he could declare and execute his verdicts unto salvation or damnation. The fire-theophany at the burning but unconsumed bush was a token of Israel's safe passage through the imminent ordeal. In the exodus crisis the pillar served to shelter, guide, and protect the elect nation; it thereby rendered for Israel a

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68 H. H. Rowley remarks that Paul "is really concerned to stress the contrast between that crossing [i.e., through the Red Sea] and baptism" (The Unity of the Bible, Philadelphia, 1953, p. 149, n. 1). But the force of Paul's warning depends precisely on the similarity of privilege enjoyed in the exodus crossing and in Christian baptism, the contrast being between Israel's post-"baptismal" behaviour and the post-baptismal conduct to which Paul exhorts Christians.

69 Cf. footnote 41 above.

70 The Apocalypticist beheld the exalted Christ as a veritable incarnation of this theophanic glory pillar, appropriately present for judgment (Rev. 1:13 ff.). The ordeal elements of the waters and sword are included in the picture as subordinate details (vv. 15 f.).
favorable verdict. But through the pillar a judgment of condemnation was declared against the Egyptians as the Lord, looking forth from the fire-cloud, discomfited them. The theophany of the cloud-pillar functioned then as Yahweh's ordeal by fire.

This exodus ordeal by the fire-cloud and the waters of the sea Paul identified as a baptism. If there were any doubt that "baptized" in I Cor. 10:2 is to be taken not as a common verb but in its technical religious sense, it would be dispelled by the addition of "into Moses", which unmistakeably carries through the parallel to the Pauline phrase, "baptized into


73 Elsewhere note Isa. 4:2–5, where, in an eschatological context, the prophet associates the theophany pillar with a discriminatory, purgative burning process which leaves in Zion a holy remnant for whom the fiery pillar is a defence and glory. In Revelation 15, the imagery of which seems to draw upon the Red Sea triumph (cf. esp. vv. 2 f.), the elements of the sea and fire (v. 2) and the flashing glory of the theophanic smoke-cloud (v. 8) are combined to introduce the mission of the seven angels who pour out the vials of ultimate divine wrath (v. 1; cf. chap. 16). The earth is thereby brought into its final ordeal which has a dual issue in the destruction of the harlot city, Babylon, and the exaltation of the bride city, Jerusalem. The latter, according to the regular pattern of the law of ordeal, enters into possession of the disputed inheritance. Each of these judicial outcomes is appropriately introduced by one of these angels of the final ordeal (17:1 and 21:9). This reflects the teaching of Jesus, where angels function as God's ordeal power, the ordeal knife that severs the wicked unto the furnace of fire (Matt. 13:49; 21:31; Mk. 13:27. Cf. Louis A. Vos, The Synoptic Traditions in the Apocalypse, Kampen, 1965, pp. 148 ff.). For the earliest revelation of the role of angels as instruments of judgment by fire and sword see Gen. 3:24. In view of the association of the Red Sea with baptism in I Cor. 10:2, E. Käsemann asks whether the heavenly sea of Rev. 15:2 ought not to be connected with the waters of baptism ("A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy" in Essays on New Testament Themes, Naperville, 1964, p. 161). This viewpoint is more positively presented by A. Farrer, The Revelation of St. John the Divine, Oxford, 1964, pp. 90 f., 171 f. Cf. Lundberg, op. cit., p. 143.
Jesus Christ". Besides, none of the non-technical meanings of βαπτίζω (e.g., dip, immerse, plunge, sink, drench, overwhelm) would accurately describe the physical relationship that actually obtained between Israel and the fire and water. In fact, neither baptismal element so much as came in contact with an Israelite during the crossing. Moreover, if in its technical employment as a water rite βαπτίζω denoted a washing or cleansing, we could not account for Paul’s usage in I Cor. 10:2. For the effect of the passage through the Red Sea was not a cleansing of the Israelites — may they not even have been a little dustier when they reached the far shore? Also, the idea of washing would not readily account for the "into Moses" aspect of this baptism. If on the other hand, we grant that technical, ritual baptism signified for Paul a process of judicial ordeal, his placing of the Red Sea crossing in the category of baptism makes transparent sense. What the apostle meant when he said that the fathers were baptized into Moses in their passage under the cloud and through the sea was that the Lord thereby brought them into an ordeal by those elements, an ordeal through which he declared them accepted as the servant people of his covenant and so under the authority of Moses, his mediatorial vicegerent.

Lundberg (op. cit., pp. 140–142) would support this conclusion on the ground that the baptism "in the cloud" is cited as an equivalent to being baptized "by one Spirit" (I Cor. 12:13). He notes Mk. 9:7; Lk. 1:35; and the use of ἐκπαιδεύω in the LXX for the descent of the cloud. Cf. Mt. 3:11.

On the assumption that the place of Israel’s crossing, yam ṣêph, means "sea of reeds", it has been suggested that this name may have brought to the Exodus author’s mind the Sea of Reeds which figures in Egyptian mythology. This sea (also known as a sea of the underworld and of heaven and of life) was a sea of purification through which the soul must pass for regeneration. (So J. R. Towers, "The Red Sea" in Journal of Near Eastern Studies, 1959, pp. 150–153). But the explanation of Paul’s use of βαπτίζω must be sought elsewhere. On the meaning of the Hebrew yam ṣêph, cf. M. Copisarow, "The Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Hebrew Concept of the Red Sea", in Vetus Testamentum, 1962, pp. 1–13.

Cf. my Treaty of the Great King, pp. 30, 36 f. That baptism, for Paul, was an act which conveyed one through death into the new world is maintained by Lundberg (op. cit., pp. 135 ff.) on the ground that there was current a similar interpretation of the Red Sea episode, to which Paul likened Christian baptism. He also assembles the evidence for the early
We would judge, therefore, that for Paul, as for Peter, the sacrament of Christian baptism signified a trial by ordeal and that the term $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\iota\varsigma\omega$, in its secondary, technical usage, had reference to the ordeal character of a person's encounter with the baptismal element.

Thoroughly congenial to the ordeal interpretation of the baptismal symbolism is the New Testament's exposition of baptism as a participation with Christ in the judgment ordeal of his death, burial, and resurrection.\textsuperscript{77} We shall concentrate here on Colossians 2:11 ff. because in this passage there is a noteworthy interrelating of biblical ordeal symbols and realities in explication of Christ's sufferings and triumph.

Earlier we followed the exegesis of "the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:11) that regards "of Christ" as an objective genitive and "the circumcision", therefore, as the crucifixion of Christ. "Without hands" would then mean that his circumcision was no mere human symbolization of the curse sanction of the law but the actual divine judgment. "Putting off the body of flesh" would further contrast the crucifixion to the symbolic removal of the foreskin as being a perfecting of circumcision in a complete cutting off unto death and that as an object of divine cursing.\textsuperscript{78} According to another interpretation of the verse, "of Christ" is a subjective genitive and "the circumcision" is a spiritual circumcision experienced by the one who is in Christ, namely, crucifixion of the old man, or destruction of the body of sin.\textsuperscript{79} This circumcision would be "without hands" because a divinely wrought spiritual reality, not a mere external symbol.

The choice between these two interpretations is difficult.\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{77} See Rom. 6:3 ff.; Col. 2:11 ff.; cf. 1 Cor. 1:13; Lk. 12:50.

\textsuperscript{78} This would accord with Paul's usage in Col. 1:22; cf. Eph. 2:15 f.

\textsuperscript{79} "Putting off the body of flesh" is thus understood according to the thought of Col. 3:9; cf., e.g., Rom. 6:6 with its similar context.

But even if this “circumcision of Christ” is understood as an experience of the Christian, it is still one which he has in his identification with Christ in his crucifixion. For in this passage as a whole (including now verses 11a and 12), Christian experience is modelled by Paul after the pattern of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection, the Christian’s circumcision (v. 11a) corresponding to Christ’s death.\(^\text{61}\) If then Paul calls the Christian death experience a circumcision it is only because he was first of all prepared to call Christ’s death a circumcision. Our conception of the crucifixion ordeal is thereby enriched with the thought associations of the ancient sign of the ritual knife ordeal.\(^\text{62}\)

Paul’s delineation of the death of Christ includes the additional ordeal feature of decision rendered through combat (v. 15). A legal setting is already indicated in verse 14 by the statement that the curse claim of the law was satisfied on the cross.\(^\text{63}\) Then the accusing role of Satan in the judgment of God’s people is suggested by the demonic antagonists who face Christ in his judgment conflict (v. 15).\(^\text{64}\) It is by victory

\(^\text{61}\) As noted earlier, where the same pattern emerges in Rom. 6:3 ff., the first step is called death, whereas in Col. 2:11 it is circumcision.

\(^\text{62}\) So, for example, the crucifixion is linked to the Genesis 15 circumcision-oath of the Lord as fulnessment to symbolic prophecy. Incidentally, since the theophany in Genesis 15 is essentially the ordeal fire-cloud, the remarkable picture presented there is that of the divine fire ordeal itself undergoing division in the covenental knife ordeal.

\(^\text{63}\) Possibly the figure of the χειρόγραφος and its “blotting out” (ἐξαλείφας) was suggested to Paul by the jealousy ordeal of Num. 5, which prescribed a handwritten document and a “blotting out” (the same verb in the LXX). The χειρόγραφος would then contain the curses of the covenant sworn to by its members and blotted out by being visited on Christ on the cross, just as the curses of the jealousy document sworn to by the woman in her oath of clearance were obliterated only in an act of divine judgment, being absorbed into the water drunk by the woman and so made the instrument of the ordeal verdict.

\(^\text{64}\) In Jewish apocalyptic, χειρόγραφος is found as the designation of a book held by an accusing angel and recording sins which the seer desires blotted out. See the discussion of A. J. Bandstra, The Law and the Elements of the World, Kampen, 1964, pp. 164 ff. Bandstra’s own view of the passage as a whole is distinctive. Following O. A. Blanchette, he takes χειρόγραφος as a metaphor for our sinful flesh as borne by Christ and regards that, rather than the principalities and powers or some object understood (so the Latin fathers), as the object of ἀπεκδυσάμενος.
in this combat with Satan’s hosts that the vindication of Christ and the acquittal of those who are united with him in his ordeal is secured.\textsuperscript{85} Christ’s triumphing involves an action denoted by the problematic \textit{ἀπεκδύσαμενος}. According to a popular exegesis of this term, Christ stripped the vanquished principalities and powers of their armour. In that case we might compare the imagery to the ordeal combat of the champions David and Goliath, wherein, Yahweh having judged in favor of Israel, David stripped the giant of his armour and carried it away in triumph.\textsuperscript{86} But it is worth considering whether the figurative allusion in Col. 2:15 is not rather to the well attested ancient practice of belt-wrestling as a combat ordeal technique in court procedure. Victory and favorable verdict were achieved by stripping off the adversary’s wrestling belt.\textsuperscript{87} According to this interpretation of \textit{ἀπεκδύσαμενος} (and relating it to the \textit{ἀπέκδυσις} of verse 11), the passage would mean that Christ in his very suffering of the circumcision curse of crucifixion accomplished the circumcision-stripping off of his demonic opponents. The divine verdict was registered in the triumphant emergence of Christ from the domain of death; our Lord “was raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:25b). His death-burial-resurrection was then a victory over the accusers, a stripping away of their legal claims, exposing, overcoming, and casting them out through the belt-grappling of a divine ordeal.

Graphic confirmation of the ordeal significance of baptism is thus found in the Pauline integration of baptism with the messianic death-burial-resurrection schema, especially where Paul expounds the latter as both a circumcision and a judicial ordeal by combat.

\textsuperscript{85} In the New Testament Apocalypse the verdict against the Accuser is declared through a battle ordeal (Rev. 12:7 ff.).

\textsuperscript{86} Cf. I Sam. 17:54.

Mention must be made of the common significance of baptism and circumcision which emerges so clearly in this same connection. Paul understood both of these rituals as signs made with hands, signifying union with Christ in his representative judgment ordeal. He also interpreted both as signs of the corresponding spiritual death and resurrection of believers. Especially remarkable is the ease with which Paul in Col. 2:11 f. combines circumcision with baptism as complementary signs of the death-burial-resurrection pattern, whereas elsewhere (Rom. 6:3 ff.) baptism by itself serves as sign of the entire complex.

2. New Covenant Judgment

Is the interpretation of Christian baptism as a sign of covenantal judgment ordeal compatible with the biblical teaching concerning the newness of the New Covenant? Even if the earlier covenants were law covenants enforceable by dual sanctions, with both the blessing and the curse signified by the sign of circumcision, the question may still be raised whether the introduction of the new order did not constitute so radical a change as to transform the covenant into an administration exclusively of blessing. Is not that the force, for example, of Jeremiah’s prophecy of the New Covenant? And must not the baptismal sign of the New Covenant differ then in this respect from the old consecration sign of circumcision?

This problem was anticipated in the development of our biblico-theological definition of covenant. Law was there shown to be a fundamental element in the Covenant of Redemption. With respect to the redemptive revelation at last given in Christ, the revelation which is the New Covenant, it was observed that for Christ, as the covenant Servant and second Adam, the redemptive mission was comprehensively one of obedience to the law of the covenant as the way to secure the covenant’s blessings. The proper purpose of the New Covenant was found to be realized precisely in this, that Christ through his active and passive obedience as the

\[88\] See "Law Covenant".
representatives of his people and for their salvation honored the law of the kingdom of God in its abiding stipulations and sanctions even as revealed from the beginning in the Covenant of Creation and as republished in the redemptive administrations of the Old Testament. Whatever it is, therefore, that constitutes the newness of the New Covenant, it is not the negation of its law character, law being understood as the principle that makes kingdom inheritance dependent on the obedience of a representative federal head. Indeed, this aspect of the essential law character of the Covenant of Redemption is nowhere more clearly displayed than here in the New Covenant, its perfecting administration.

Moreover, the newness of the New Covenant does not consist in a reduction of the Covenant of Redemption to the principle of election and guaranteed blessing. Its law character is seen in this too that it continues to be a covenant with dual sanctions. In this connection, account must be taken of Jeremiah’s classic prophecy of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31 ff.). Since exegesis has often erred by way of an oversimplified stress on the difference or newness of the divine work promised in this passage, it is important to mark the continuity that is evident even here between the New and the Old Covenants. For all its difference, the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31 is still patterned after the Sinaitic Covenant. It is a writing of the law on the heart rather than on tables of stone (v. 33; cf. II Cor. 3:3), but it is another writing of the law. It is a new law covenant. Hence, for Jeremiah, the New Covenant, though it could be sharply contrasted with the Old (v. 32), was nevertheless a renewal

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89 In fact, Jeremiah’s concept of the New Covenant was a development of that already presented by Moses in the sanctions section of the Deuteronomic renewal of the Sinaitic Covenant (Deut. 30:1–10; see my Treaty of the Great King, pp. 132 f.).


91 Relevant here would be all that might be said of the New Testament’s teaching that Jesus is a new and greater Moses. Cf. W. D. Davies, The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount, Cambridge, 1964, pp. 25 ff.; T. F. Glasson, Moses in the Fourth Gospel, Naperville, 1963. Note also Jesus’ fulfillment of the role of the Servant of the Lord, which in its individual aspect, and specifically in the area of law giving, reflects the figure of Moses.
of the Mosaic Covenant. It belonged to the familiar administrative pattern of periodic covenant renewal (of which the cycle of sabbatical years was an expression), and renewal is the exponent of continuity.

Of course, this particular renewal of the ancient law covenant was unique in that it was the final, perfecting renewal. It was the New Covenant. Its distinctiveness, according to Jeremiah's description of it, was that of fulfillment in contrast to the penultimate and imperfect nature of the Mosaic Covenant in all its previous renewals. This New Covenant would bring to pass the consummation of God's grace — consummation of divine revelation to men (vv. 33a, 34a), consummation of the personal relationship of God to men in forgiveness and fellowship (vv. 33b, 34b). But if the distinctiveness of the New Covenant is that of consummation, if when it abrogates it consummates, then its very discontinuity is expressive of its profound, organic unity with the Old Covenant.

Jeremiah speaks, to be sure, only of a consummation of grace; he does not mention a consummation of curses in the New Covenant. But the proper purpose of that covenant was, after all, salvation. Moreover, Jeremiah's particular concern was with the difference between the new and the old, and in respect of the visitation of covenant curses upon covenant members the New Covenant was not as clearly distinctive. Indeed, that aspect of covenant administration was particularly prominent in the Old Covenant, the divine wrath being at last visited upon the city of the great King and upon the Old Testament people unto the uttermost.

Further, there is no reason to regard Jeremiah's description of the New Covenant as a comprehensive analysis, on the basis of which an exclusive judgment might then be rendered, excluding the curse sanction from a place in New Covenant administration. Even the aspect of New Covenant consummation that Jeremiah does deal with he views from the limited

eschatological perspective of an Old Testament prophet. He beheld the messianic accomplishment in that perfection which historically is reached only in the fully eschatological age to come, as the ultimate goal of a process which in the present semi-eschatological age of this world is still marked by tragic imperfection. But the theologian of to-day ought not impose on himself the visionary limitations of an Old Testament prophet. By virtue of the fuller revelation he enjoys he is able to distinguish these two distinct stages in the history of the New Covenant and to observe plainly that the imperfection of the covenant people and program has continued on from the Old Covenant into the present phase of New Covenant history. It is in accordance with this still only semi-eschatological state of affairs that the administration of the New Covenant is presently characterized by dual sanctions, having, in particular, anathemas to pronounce and excommunications to execute.  

93 Cf. Lk. 10:24; 1 Pet. 1:10–12.
94 In Bultmann's formal reduction of the New Covenant to "a radically eschatological dimension, that is, a dimension outside the world" we have an example of an oversimplified appeal to Jer. 31:31 ff. and similar biblical data in the interests of a metaphysic inhospitable to the biblical revelation of the New Covenant as historical ("Prophecy and Fulfillment" in Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics, ed. C. Westermann, Richmond, 1963, (trans., J. C. G. Greig; originally in Studia Theologica, II (1949), pp. 21–44) p. 63; cf. pp. 61 f.). His dichotomy between historical and eschatological leaves no room for the biblical concept of a semi-eschatological age or community, just as it cannot accommodate a genuinely biblical concept of radical eschatology as historical consummation.

To cite another example, it is failure to reckon adequately with the only semi-eschatological character of the present administration of the New Covenant that vitiates R. E. O. White's critique of Marcel's use of the doctrine of the covenant in his discussion of baptism (The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation, Grand Rapids, 1960, pp. 286 ff.).

Similarly, P. K. Jewett, while expressing a proper concern not to atrophy the movement of covenant history at some Old Testament stage, falls into the opposite error of prematurely precipitating the age to come. For when he defends a theology of baptism that bounds the rite and the covenant by faith, he anticipates the ultimate judicial separation into blessed faithful and accursed hypocrites of those who here and now, in the present semi-eschatological phase of the church's existence in this world, form the still undifferentiated mixed multitude of the covenant community. (See his "Baptism (Baptist View)" in The Encyclopedia of Christianity, ed. E. H. Palmer, Wilmington, 1964, i, pp. 524 f.).
To interpret Jeremiah's prophetic concept of the New Covenant as excluding curse sanctions is, therefore, to condemn it as fallacious. For the historical fact is that New Covenant administration includes both blessing and curse.55 The Christ who stands like the theophanic ordeal pillar of fire in the midst of the seven churches addresses to them threats as well as promises, curses as well as blessings.66 By his apostle he warns the Gentiles who are grafted into the tree of the covenant that just as Israelite branches had been broken off for their unbelief, they too, if they failed to stand fast through faith, would not be spared.67 Again, when the Lord appears in the final ordeal theophany as the Judge of the quick and the dead, taking fiery vengeance on them that obey not the gospel, he will bring before his judgment throne all who have been within his church of the New Covenant. There his declaration of the curse of the covenant will fall on the ears of some who in this world have been within the community that formally owns his covenant lordship, so that still in that day they think to cry, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?"68 There is, therefore, a fulfillment of the covenant lordship of Christ over his New Testament church unto condemnation and death as well as unto justification and life. In the execution of both verdicts, whether unto life or unto death, the New Covenant will be enforced and perfected.

55 Of incidental interest here is the understanding of the new covenant concept which is represented by the Qumran and Damascus covenanters when they set forth themselves as the community of the new covenant (1QpHab, II, 3; CDC, VI, 19; VIII, 21; XIX, 33 f.; XX, 12). Especially significant for the question under discussion above is the fact that these new covenant claimants continued the Mosaic covenant tradition of blessings and curses in an oath ritual of entrance (1QS, II, 4 ff.; CDC, XV, 1 ff.) and, consistently, had regulations for the excommunication of covenant breakers. Moreover, the structure of the ancient treaties has been more broadly traced in sections of the Rule of the Community and of the Damascus Document (see Baltzer, op. cit., pp. 105-127).

56 Rev. 2 and 3. Do we see in the figures of the messengers (angels) of the churches the messengers of the covenant lawsuit?


We are bound to conclude, therefore, that the newness of the New Covenant cannot involve the elimination of the curse sanction as a component of the covenant and that this newness consequently poses no problem for the interpretation of Christian baptism as a sign of ordeal embrace of both blessing and curse. In confirmation of this conclusion we may recall that John the Baptist analyzed the work of the coming One as a baptism of judgment in the Holy Spirit and fire. Christ so baptized the Mosaic covenant community and he so baptizes the congregation of the New Covenant.

Pentecost belongs to both the old and new orders. It was the beginning of the messianic ordeal visited on the Mosaic community. Those who received that baptism of Pentecost emerged vindicated as the people of the New Covenant, the inheritors of the kingdom. Pentecost was thus a baptismal ordeal in Spirit and fire in which redemptive covenant realized its proper end. But the Israel of that generation which did not share in this baptism of justification soon experienced the messianic baptism as a judgment curse unto death, destruction, and dispersion. So also the semi-eschatological phase of the New Covenant moves on towards a messianic ordeal which will bring for the justified meek, the inheritance of the earth, but judicial exposure and the curse-sentence of excision for the apostates. As an Old Testament prophet, even though standing at the threshold of the messianic kingdom, John did not distinguish these distinct moments in the messianic baptism-ordeal. But we who are within the kingdom of God perceive that John’s own water ritual pointed to the ordeal of Israel, while the Christian rite that bears the name and continues the essential form of John’s baptism signifies the rapidly approaching ordeal appointment of the people of the New Covenant.

Conclusions: Christian baptism is a sign of the eschatological ordeal in which the Lord of the covenant brings his servants to account. In baptismal contexts this judgment is often viewed more specifically as that through which the Christian passes in Christ, in whose ordeal the final judgment of the elect was intruded into mid-history. That is, judgment is

viewed in such cases only in so far as it involves the specific verdict of justification. Agreeably, the import of the baptismal sign of judgment is then expounded in soteriological terms like regeneration, sanctification, incorporation by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ, or protective sealing against the day of wrath. But even when the consideration of baptism is thus restricted to its significance for the elect, judgment as curse and death remains at the center of baptism's import and continues to be the specific object of its symbolic portrayal. For the blessing of the elect arises only out of their Saviour's accursed death.

One's theology of the sacramental signs of the covenant will have to be consistent with his theology of the covenant itself. If the covenant concept is constricted to an administration of grace to the elect, then it will hardly seem possible that the signs marking entrance into the covenant should signify a judicial consummation of the covenant which is fraught with ultimate curse as well as ultimate blessing. It has appeared, however, that there is independent evidence available for interpreting these signs of incorporation as signifying the dual covenant sanctions and this provides then yet further proof of the impossibility of satisfying all the biblical data with the restricted, guaranteed-promise conception of covenant. It is also another confirmation of the necessity of making the idea of God's lordship the central focus of the systematic doctrine of covenant.

Now if the covenant is first and last a declaration of God's lordship, then the baptismal sign of entrance into it will before all other things be a sign of coming under the jurisdiction of the covenant and particularly under the covenantal dominion of the Lord. Christian baptism is thus the New Covenant sign of consecration or discipleship.

It is immediately evident in the great commission (Matt. 28:18–20) that commitment to the authority of Christ is the chief thing in Christian baptism. For there baptizing the nations takes its place alongside teaching them to obey Christ's commandments in specification of the charge to disciple them to him who has been given all authority in heaven and earth.100

100 Note also the interrelationship of baptizing and making disciples in John 4:1.
Of similar significance are a concatenation like Paul’s “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5) and the common confession of Jesus as Lord or Christ in baptismal formulae. The related baptismal phraseology of “in (or into) the name of Jesus Christ” (or “of the Lord”, or of the Trinity) also expresses the nature of baptism as confirmation of an authority or ownership relationship, judging from analogous usage in the Old Testament and in Hellenistic legal and commercial papyri. Further evidence is the representation of baptism as a seal, in the sense of a token of authority or mark of ownership.

The incorporation of disciples into the jurisdiction of the New Covenant by the baptismal confession of Christ as Lord is in clear continuity with the tradition of the initiatory oath of allegiance found in Old Testament covenantal engagements (and their extra-biblical counterparts). As an oath-sign of

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103 E. g., Deut. 28:9, 10; Isa. 63:19.


105 Cf. G. W. H. Lampe, The Seal of the Spirit, London, New York, Toronto, 1951, pp. 8–18. According to the New Testament emphasis on the proper soteric purpose of redemptive covenant, the seal motif may be used as an assurance to believers of their security in the hour of eschatological crisis (Eph. 1:13 f.; 4:30; II Tim. 2:19; Rev. 7:2 ff.; 14:1; 22:4). But baptism is to be more comprehensively understood as a sealing with the name of the Trinity invoked in the consecration oath in recognition that the triune Lord is God of the covenant oath and its dual sanctions.

106 See the discussion of 1 Pet. 3:21 above. Compare, also, the initiatory oaths required by the Essenes (Josephus, Wars, II, 8, 7 f.) and at Qumran for entrance into the covenant (IQS, I, 16 ff.; V, 8 ff.). On the self-maledictory character of these oaths, see Qumran, 12 (cf. 11:4 ff.). In connection with I Cor. 11:27 and Heb. 10:26–31, G. E. Mendenhall notes the continuity between the significance of the cup of the New Covenant sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and the Mosaic tradition of covenant oath and curse ("Covenant", in The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Nashville, 1962, p. 722).
allegiance to Christ the Lord, baptism is a sacrament in the original sense of *sacramentum* in its etymological relation to the idea of consecrate and more particularly in its employment for the military oath of allegiance.\(^{106}\) And if the immediate function of baptism in covenant administration is to serve as the ritual of an oath of discipleship, we have in that another indication that baptism is a symbolic portrayal of the judgment of the covenant. For, as we have seen, covenant oath rituals were enactments of the sanctions invoked in the oath. Indeed from these historic antecedents we may infer that baptism as an oath ritual symbolizes in particular the curse sanction, the death judgment threatened in the covenant.\(^{107}\)

The foregoing analyses bear out the judgment that there is a thoroughgoing correspondence between the meaning of baptism and that of circumcision. Both are confessional oath signs of consecration to the Lord of the covenant and both signify his ultimate redemptive judgment with its potential of both condemnation and justification. There is indeed a shift in emphasis from the malediction side of the judgment spectrum to the vindication side as covenant revelation moves on from Old Testament circumcision to New Testament baptism (the baptism of John being in this respect, too, transitional). This change reflects the movement of redemptive history from an administration of condemnation to one of righteousness. Nevertheless, the maledictory element is no more to be excluded from the New Testament sign of consecration because of this shift in emphasis than vindication-

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\(^{106}\) Cf. Pliny's use of *sacramentum* to denote the oath taken by Christians in their worship, binding themselves to abstain from certain sins (*Letters*, X, 96). Early baptismal liturgy and comments thereon commonly expound the rite as an engagement to serve God and as a renunciation of Satan. Cf. 1 Tim. 6:12.

\(^{107}\) See the Hittite Soldiers' Oath in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. Pritchard, Princeton, 1950, pp. 353 f. Cf. our discussion of circumcision above. To say that baptism portrays the covenant curse is not to say that baptism as a sign of trial by ordeal signifies only an unfavorable verdict. For as we have previously observed in connection with both circumcision and baptism, the curse of the ordeal may be suffered by the forsworn in himself but it is undergone by the elect as a soteric experience in their identification with the Redeemer.
qualification is to be excluded from the meaning of the Old Testament rite simply because that was characteristically an administration of condemnation and death.

The form and name of baptism are enough to prevent such an oversimplification of its complex meaning. The form, as we have seen, symbolizes a visitation of judgment waters and, as its name indicates, the ritual proper does not comprise the emergence of the baptized person from the water but only his entrance into the symbolic judgment. For on no view of the meaning of \( \beta \alpha \nu \tau \rho \iota \varsigma \omega \) is any thought of emergence involved. In fact, the metaphorical meaning that it develops is that of perishing.\(^{106}\) At the same time there is no contradiction between the form or name of the sign and the soteriological aspect of baptism's significance, which is emphasized in the New Testament. For even though the waters portray the judgment curse, the rite does not prejudge the ultimate issue of the individual's destiny one way or the other. It places him under the authority of the Lord for judgment and tells him that as a sinner he must pass through the curse; yet it also calls him to union with his Lord, promising to all who are found in Christ a safe passage through the curse waters of the ordeal.

A further word on the relevance of the foregoing for the question of the mode of administering baptism is in order. As for the meaning of \( \beta \alpha \nu \tau \rho \iota \varsigma \omega \), its semantic development evidently proceeded from the primary idea of dipping in water to secondary metaphorical ideas like overwhelm and (in the Scriptures) to the secondary special idea of administering a religious water rite. Then from the particular significance of certain of these sacred rituals as signs of ordeal (and perhaps with an assist from the metaphorical meaning of overwhelm, which was common in the usage of the Greek world) \( \beta \alpha \nu \tau \rho \iota \varsigma \omega \) came to be used in Scripture for the idea of undergoing a judgment ordeal, whether or not by water. If this analysis is in the main correct, it is academic to debate the contention

\(^{106}\) This warns against the common but unwarranted attempt to trace a complete modal parallel between the baptismal action and the death-burial-resurrection pattern of Christ's ordeal. Cf. further John Murray, *Christian Baptism*, Philadelphia, 1952, pp. 29–33.
that the idea of immersion belongs inseparably to the primary meaning of \( βαπτίζω \). Further, any exclusivistic claims for the sole propriety of some one mode of administering baptism are gratuitous. For any mode of relating the water to a person that is attested in the various biblical water ordeals would have biblical warrant. Of course, not all such modes would prove expedient. In Israel’s passage through the Red Sea the baptismal waters stood in a threatening (if actually protective) position over against the Israelites without, however, touching them, while in the Jordan crossing, the waters were so far removed as to be quite out of sight. At the other extreme, Jonah, like the accused in the Babylonian water ordeal, was plunged into the depths (not to mention now his novel conveyance) and the baptized family in the Noahic deluge ordeal sailed over the rising flood while torrents descended from above.\(^{109}\)

If this means on the one hand that no exclusive claims can be made for the mode of immersion, it would nevertheless appear that the suitability of that mode remains unimpaired. Baptism by immersion will surely impress many as a most eloquent way of portraying the great judgment of God, while the familiar imposition of moistened finger tips which is generously called sprinkling must seem to many to project quite inadequately the threatening power and crisis of the ultimate ordeal.\(^{110}\) Is it not time for Reformed liturgists to address themselves to the task of finding a form for the baptismal sign that will capture and convey something of the decisive encounter which baptism signifies?\(^{111}\)

\(^{109}\) It was noted earlier that in the witness of John the Baptist the messianic baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire was to be understood as an ordeal. The coming of the Spirit by an effusion at Pentecost may, therefore, be cited as a modal variety of baptismal ordeal.

\(^{110}\) Since the idea of qualification in the specific form of cleansing is included in the import of baptism (\( cf., \ e.g., \) Eph. 5:26; Tit. 3:5; Acts 22:16) it might seem desirable to practise a mode of baptism suggestive of washing as well as ordeal. To that extent, appeals to ritual cleansing techniques such as sprinkling would have some relevance.

\(^{111}\) F. W. Dillistone calls it “one of the most urgent tasks of our day” to revitalize the potentially profound appeal of this water symbol within the Christian community (\textit{Christianity and Symbolism}, Philadelphia, 1955, p. 187; \textit{cf.} pp. 215 f.).
factory solution would seem to require such a decided step in the general direction of the immersion ritual as to open the possibility for hopeful dialogue in the interests of a consensus of all concerned.

III. The Administration of Circumcision and Baptism

The Covenant of Redemption is an administration of God's Kingdom. It is an institutional embodiment of the divine lordship in an earthly community. The question arises then as to how this divine authority structure relates itself to other coexisting authority structures. At present we are concerned with this matter in so far as it may involve principles relevant to the administration of the covenantal oath signs of consecration. In turning to this aspect of our study of circumcision and baptism, we will once again try to sharpen our historical perspective by viewing the divine covenants against the background of their formal counterparts in the ancient world.

A. Vassal Authority in Covenant Administration

The suzerain-vassal covenants were authority structures which brought outlying spheres of authority under the sanctioned control of an imperial power. The great king gave his treaty to a vassal who was himself also a king. In imposing his covenant the suzerain did not dissolve the royal authority of his vassal, as an empire builder would in the case of the territorial annexation of another kingdom as a province. Indeed, it was precisely in his status as a king that the vassal was addressed in the treaty. The dynastic succession within the vassal kingdom was sometimes a matter of explicit concern in the treaty stipulations. The historical prologue of the treaty might even reflect on the fact that it was the suzerain's efforts that had established the vassal king on his throne; more than that, the covenant itself was at times the very means of his doing so. It was then by swearing the vassal's oath of allegiance that a throne aspirant became king or a
king was re-established in his dominion over his people. There is even evidence that the treaty could be the means of enlarging a vassal king's domain.\textsuperscript{112}

It is of course obvious from the whole purpose of these treaties that the vassal king in taking the ratificatory oath did so in his capacity as king and thus brought his kingdom with him into the relationship of allegiance to the suzerain. Moreover, from express statements in the treaties we know that the vassal king assumed responsibility for his sons and more remote descendants, committing them with himself in his covenant oath. Consequently, these descendants are mentioned in the curses as objects of divine vengeance if the covenant sworn by the vassal king should be broken.

A few examples may be cited. The treaty of Esarhaddon with Ramataia begins:

The treaty which Esarhaddon, king of the world, king of Assyria, son of Sennacherib, likewise king of the world, king of Assyria, with Ramataia, city-ruler of Urakazabanu, with his sons, his grandsons, with all the Urakazabaneans young and old, as many as there be — with (all of) you, your sons, your grandsons who will exist in days to come after the treaty, from sunrise to sunset, over as many as Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, exercises kingship and lordship — (so) he has made the treaty with you concerning Ashurbanipal, the crown-prince, son of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria.\textsuperscript{113}

Later in this same treaty Ramataia is reminded:

[Esarhaddon] has made you take an oath that you will relate [the treaty-provisions] to your sons and to your grandsons, to your seed, to your seed's seed which shall be (born) in the future, that you will order them as follows: — 'Guard this treaty. Do not transgress your treaty, (or) you will lose your lives, you will be turning over your dwellings to be shattered, your people to be carried off'.\textsuperscript{114}


\textsuperscript{113} Col. 1:1–12. The translation is that of D. J. Wiseman in \textit{The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon}, p. 30. For a similar formula in biblical covenant administration see Deut. 29:9–14 (10–15). \textit{ Cf.}, also, the language of Peter in Acts 2:39; \textit{cf. v. 17}.

\textsuperscript{114} Col. 4:287–295. See Wiseman, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 49 ff.
The Sefireh treaty begins:

The treaty of Bar-ga'ayah, King of KTK, with Mati'el, son of 'Attarsamak, King of Arpad; and the treaty of the sons of Bar-ga'ayah with the sons of Mati'el; and the treaty of the grandsons of Bar-ga'aya[h and] his [descendants] with the descendants of Mati'el.\textsuperscript{115}

The concluding curse of the treaty between the Hittite Mursilis and Duppi-Tessub of Amurru reads:

The words of the treaty and the oath that are inscribed on this tablet—should Duppi-Tessub not honor these words of the treaty and the oath, may these gods of the oath destroy Duppi-Tessub together with his person, his wife, his son, his grandson, his house, his land and together with everything that he owns.\textsuperscript{116}

It is clear then that these ancient treaties, on the form of which the redemptive covenants were patterned, were engagements not merely between individuals but between broader authority structures. In particular, the servant king who was bound by the treaty was bound not alone but together with his subjects and his descendants.

\textit{B. Circumcision and Generation}

From the pervasive formal correspondence between the divine covenants and the international vassal treaties it would be reasonable to infer that in the covenant of circumcision too the chief vassal figure was approached not in abstraction from his authority status but with his societal station in view, being confronted with the demand to subject all within his sphere of authority to that higher authority before which he was himself summoned to bow the knee. We are not dependent, however, solely on such inference, for analysis of the direct Scriptural evidence leads us to the same conclusion.

One aspect of the circumcision rite not considered above has direct relevance here. The fact that circumcision was

\textsuperscript{115} I, A, 1 ff. The translation is that given in McCarthy, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 189.

\textsuperscript{116} The translation is that of A. Goetze in \textit{Ancient Near Eastern Texts}, p. 205.
performed on an organ of generation is surely meant to indicate that the significance of the rite—both as a sign of malediction and of consecration—had reference to the descendants of the vassal who swore the circumcision oath-curse.

Supplementing what we have concluded as to the primary oath-curse meaning of circumcision, we may now add that the specific malediction expressed by the symbolic action of circumcision the foreskin was the cutting off of the vassal’s descendants so as to leave him without heir or name in the kingdom. In the parallel extra-biblical treaties there are numerous instances of the particular curse of being denied offspring or having one’s descendants cut off. The following examples come from Esarhaddon’s treaty with Ramataia.

“May he [Ashur] never grant you fatherhood” (col. vi, l. 415 f.). “[May Ṣarpanitu who gives] name and seed, destroy your name and your seed [from the land]” (col. vi, l. 435 f.). “[Just as the seed of] a hinney [is sterile,] [may your name,] your seed and the seed of [your sons] and your [daughters be destroyed] from the land” (col. vii, ll. 537–539). A curse against the one who violated the treaty of Ashurnirari V with Mati’ilu was that he might “be a mule” and “his wife [have no] offspring.” The treaty-deed of Abban with Jarimlim concludes with this curse against any who would alter Abban’s deed: “May Ishtar who makes eunuchs . . . bind his member” (l. 19 f.). The final curse in the treaty of Tudhaliyas IV and Ulmi-Teshub is that if anyone changes even a word of the treaty tablet, “may . . . the thousand gods of this tablet root that man’s descendants out of the land of Hatti” (rev. 25 ff.).

In this common treaty curse there was the perfect foil for the blessing that was so prominent in the covenant of circumcision, the blessing of the promised son for Abraham and Sarah. And this precise opposition that obtains between the particular blessing that is dominant in the Genesis 17 context and the circumcision-curse as we have interpreted it becomes

117 Cf. Wiseman, op. cit., pp. 60, 62, 70. The first example quoted is the first specific curse in the lengthy curse section of this treaty.
118 Col. V. Cf. McCarthy, op. cit., p. 196.
120 Cf. McCarthy, op. cit., p. 185.
convincing proof of the correctness of that interpretation when we observe that such an exact matching of curses and blessings is characteristic of the sanctions of the ancient treaties. For a biblical example, see in the Deuteronomic treaty the pairing of the six-fold blessing of 28:3–6 and the six-fold curse of 28:16–19, and note especially the appearance there again of the particular curse-blessing contrast featured in the covenant of circumcision: "cursed (or blessed) shall be the fruit of thy body" (vv. 4 and 18).

But the circumcision oath-rite was also a sign of consecration and in relation to that the meaning of the application of the circumcision sign to the male organ of generation would be that the descendants of the circumcised were consecrated with himself to the Lord of the covenant. Corresponding to this was God's promissory definition of this covenant as one he would establish with Abraham's descendants after him (Gen. 17:7). What may be inferred from the nature of circumcision as a cutting off of the foreskin is more explicitly expressed by the prescription of Genesis 17 that circumcision was to be administered (not only at the initial ratification ceremony of that day but throughout the coming generations) to the vassal's sons, and that on their eighth day (v. 12). Thus the vassal's descendants, who yet unborn were consecrated in the circumcision of their forefathers, were again and individually consecrated by the direct application of the sign of consecration to themselves.

These regulations for the administration of circumcision reveal the Abrahamic Covenant to be, like other vassal covenants, an instrument for incorporating a whole authority unit within the higher jurisdiction of the covenant suzerain. Nor was the authority unit in question confined to the sphere of Abraham's parental authority. He was instructed to bring the servants of his house as well as his son Ishmael under the sign of Yahweh's authority (vv. 12 f., 23, 27). The vassal unit thus extended to the more comprehensive sphere comprised within Abraham's authority as parent-householder.

The principle emerges here that a man who enters God's covenant by personal confession is held responsible by his Lord to bind with himself under the yoke of the covenant certain others of his subordinates (as more precisely specified
in the stipulations of a particular covenant administration). To fail to do so is a contradiction of one's oath of allegiance. That is why Moses, for the uncircumcision of his son, was in peril of the curse that was invoked against him in his own circumcision (Exod. 4:24–26). The verses immediately preceding that episode record God's commission to Moses to demand of Pharaoh that he let God's covenant son Israel go to serve him (Exod. 4:21–23). But how could Moses be the bearer of such a demand, how could he be the minister of God to lead forth the multitude of the Lord's servant-sons to their great consecration act at the mount of God, when he had neglected to consecrate his own son to the Lord by circumcision? So it was that God threatened to cut him off from his destiny in Israel — like the accursed ram in the Assyrian ratification ritual cited earlier, separated from the herd, never again to return to its place at their head.

We conclude then that the principle of vassal authority was integral to the administration of circumcision as sign of entrance into God's redemptive covenant. Confession of Yahweh's lordship as a matter of personal faith constituted the necessary nucleus and historical beginning for the administration of the rite, and thus for the formal establishment of the covenant community for which circumcision was (paradoxically) the sign of inclusion. There had to be an Abraham. But Abraham could not enter into this oath and covenant simply as an individual. It was Abraham the

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121 A recent challenge to the traditional understanding of this passage as involving a threat against the life of Moses is presented by H. Kosmala ("The 'Bloody Husband'", in *Vetus Testamentum* 12, 1962, pp. 14–28). Taking the pericope (Exod. 4:24–26) by itself, he is able to offer a plausible interpretation of the unaltered consonantal text in terms of a threat against a son of Moses, Moses himself not figuring at all in the episode. Several of the elements of Kosmala's exegesis seem sound; yet, as he acknowledges himself (p. 15), the passage according to the context in which it comes to us concerns a divine threat against the life of Moses.

122 So understood, this seemingly abrupt intrusion into Exodus 4 has clear thematic relevance for its context. Also, the blood smearing rite performed by Zipporah to avert the threatening death (v. 25b) invites comparison with the similar feature in the original passover ritual (Exod. 12:7, 22), the occasion of which is mentioned in the divine warning cited immediately before the pericope under discussion (see Exod. 4:23).
parent-householder, Abraham the patriarch, to whom God gave the covenant of circumcision. In keeping with the nature of the covenant as that may be discerned in the light of the most relevant biblical and extra-biblical data, covenantal incorporation into the kingdom of God did not proceed exclusively in terms of individual confession. The formation of the ancient covenant community was rather a process of incorporating households which were under the authority of a confessing servant of the Lord.

C. Baptism and the Authority Principle

When covenant is no longer identified with election and guaranteed blessing, and especially when the baptismal sign of incorporation into the covenant is understood as pointing without prejudice to a judgment ordeal with the potential of both curse and blessing, certain questions that have long ensnarled the polemics of infant baptism are eliminated from consideration as no longer relevant. Within the framework of our doctrine of covenant and baptism the practice of infant baptism would clearly involve no presumption that the children of believers are Christians by birth.123 No theory of

123 Contesting the paedobaptist's appeal to the correspondence of baptism with circumcision, P. K. Jewett writes: "he reads the OT concept of a literal seed into the NT and argues that his children are Christians and members of the church by birth, with a right to baptism, just as in the OT a man was born a Jew with the right to circumcision as a citizen of the OT Jewish theocracy" (op. cit., p. 525). According to Jewett, the paedobaptist does this because of his failure to observe that while the Jews possessed a terrestrial version of the celestial inheritance, "this temporal and terrestrial aspect of the covenant blessing has now passed away" (op. cit., p. 524). The irrelevance of this type of argument for the view of covenant and baptism which the present article advocates is noted above. Here we would question the accuracy of the analysis of the difference between the historical contexts of circumcision and baptism. Since the theocracy in the kingdom form which Jewett evidently has in view came into being long after circumcision was instituted, is it not misleading to identify a Jew's right to circumcision with his citizenship in the theocratic kingdom? For over the first half-millennium of the administration of circumcision those who received it did not possess a temporal-terrestrial kingdom. Actually there is in this very respect a remarkable similarity between the age of Abraham when the covenant of circumcision was given and our New Testament age. Then as now the saints had promises of a
presumptive regeneration as the basis for the administration of baptism to infants could be reared on the foundation of law covenant. Neither, on our approach, would the baptism of the infants of believers signify a divine promise that they were destined to secure the blessings of the covenant sooner or later. Hence, there would be no need to theorize how the baptism of such might serve as a means of conveying to them the grace supposedly sealed to them by the rite, much less to apologize for the numerous cases in which that grace never is conveyed.

For us the pertinent question is whether the covenant for which baptism serves as oath-sign of incorporation is, like the divine covenants of the Old Testament and the parallel vassal covenants of the ancient world, a relationship of authority spheres rather than simply of individuals. That the New Covenant is in this respect like its precursors would be the natural inference to draw from our analysis of the New Covenant as generically one with the earlier covenants, new and old being alike law covenants, declarations of God’s lordship over a people bound to him under the sanctions of life and death.124 The pattern of authority is not peripheral but central in the vassal covenant form and therefore the whole weight of the historical case for identifying the New Covenant as a continuation of the earlier Suzerain-vassal covenants presses for the conclusion that this New Covenant is administered to confessors not just as individuals but as heads of authority units.

Direct New Testament evidence is available to the effect that Christ’s authority as Lord of the covenant does indeed extend to his disciples’ subordinates, commanding their obedience. At least that can be shown to be true in the case of the children of believers. In the discussion of infant baptism the episode of the bringing of the children to Jesus125

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has been the source of considerable contention. But in support of the point we would make we need gather no more from that episode than that our Lord heartily approved when those with parental authority over these children exercised it to bring them to him and place them under the authority of his ministry. And that much at least would seem to be beyond debate. Another significant fact is that Paul instructed the children of various congregations to obey their parents in the Lord, and in support of his charge cited the pertinent stipulation of the Sinaitic Covenant together with its accompanying covenantal sanction. Clear confirmation is also found in Paul’s directive to covenant parents to bring their children under the nurturing and admonishing authority of the Lord. In this exhortation the apostle takes for granted that it is the very authority of Christ as covenant Lord that reaches and claims children through the authority of their parents.

It is therefore a matter of express Scriptural teaching that the disciple of Christ is bound to bring those who are under his parental authority along with himself when he comes by oath under the higher authority of his covenant Suzerain. From this it follows that the Scriptures provide ample warrant for the administration of baptism to the children of confessing Christians, for baptism is the New Covenant rite whose precise significance is that of committal to Christ’s authority and of incorporation within the domain of Christ’s covenant lordship.

While the New Testament thus indicates decisively that the independent authority of the covenant servant continues to be a regulative factor in covenant administration, the explicit evidence for this is confined to household authority in its most fundamental form, the authority of the parent over his children. There does not appear to be any clear evidence in the New Testament that the societal authority structure of master and servant has been taken up into the organizational structure of the New Covenant. It would be

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126 Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20; cf. Exod. 20:12.
127 Eph. 6:4.
128 See above pp. 18 ff.
possible to interpret the New Testament accounts of household baptisms\footnote{Acts 16:15, 33 f.; I Cor. 1:16; cf. Acts 2:38 f.; 10:47 f.; 11:14; 18:8; II Tim. 1:16; 4:19.} in and of themselves as involving the baptism of household servants along with their converted masters and indeed on the basis of the confession of the latter. But nothing compels us to adopt such an interpretation of these episodes.\footnote{Since the evidence of these passages is indecisive on this point and also on the question of whether there were children present and baptized on these occasions, we have not rehearsed the details again here. For a recent examination of the related thesis that the biblical usage justifies our speaking of an \textit{oikos}-formula, see Peter Weigandt, "Zur sogenannten 'Oikosformel' " in \textit{Novum Testamentum} VI (Jan., 1963) 1, pp. 49–74. Weigandt joins K. Aland in his opposition to the \textit{oikos}-formula thesis as developed especially by E. Stauffer and J. Jeremias.} We may then ask whether there are any considerations which would rule out the reception of bond servants into the New Covenant on the basis of the authority of a believing master over them.

Since the adult servant is a personally responsible individual before God, one way of approaching our problem is to inquire whether New Testament evidence indicates that any change has taken place in the authority pattern of the covenant with respect to persons of that type. The New Covenant does appear to have instituted such a change in the case of unbelieving wives of Christian husbands. Under the Old Covenant the idea might not be entertained by one of the patriarchs or by a later Israelite that he was at liberty to permit his wife to dissociate herself from the covenantal relationship to which he had bound himself. The wives did not receive a sign of entrance into the covenant but they were none the less brought within the rule of the covenant along with the children and household servants when their husbands entered the covenant.\footnote{\textit{Cf. e.g.}, Deut. 29:10 ff.; Neh. 10:28 f.; Gen. 35:2 ff.} Whatever their personal religious attitude, as members of a covenant member’s household the wives were under the authority and sanctions of the covenant Lord. But according to I Corinthians 7:12 ff., in the New Covenant the believing husband’s marital authority is not regarded as being at the same time a covenantal authority which claims his wife for the church. In fact, an unbelieving wife is to be
permitted the initiative in determining whether she will even continue to live with her believing husband. There is no thought of his exercising the restraint of a covenantal authority to compel her to abide with him in a status of subjection to the Lord of the covenant. The important differences between the household position of the wife and that of the slave must give us some pause in using this datum concerning the wife of a believer to support a negative conclusion on the question of the covenantal status of a Christian master's unbelieving slave. On the other hand, the fact that the New Testament has changed previous covenantal administrative policy with respect to one type of adult under household authority would seem to place us under the obligation of finding positive New Testament evidence for our position if we are going to maintain that the householder's authority over other responsible adult subordinates has been taken up into the authority structure of the New Covenant. We cannot safely assume that such is the case simply on the basis of Old Testament administrative practice.

We are led to a yet more conclusive judgment on this issue when we take a broader and more analytical survey of the general relationship sustained by the covenant institution to other coexisting cultural authority structures in the successive epochs of covenant history. We cannot do more here than suggest the main outlines of this development, calling attention to the elements that are most relevant to our present topic and noticing in particular the nature of the sanctions employed in the several covenant administrations.

In the beginning under the Covenant of Creation no distinction existed between the covenant institution and an extra-covenantal area of cultural authority structures. The universal community of man in all his cultural relationships constituted precisely the form of the authority structure of the covenant. It is an ultimate goal of the Covenant of Redemption to bring about once again a total and simple institutional identification of the covenant with the entire community of the new mankind in his consummated relationship to the whole new creation. That will be the final accomplishment of Christ, the Redeemer-King.

In the historical administrations of the Covenant of Re-
demption prior to that consummation there is never a simple identification of the covenant structure with the totality of the human cultural complex. But neither is there a complete separation between the two. The Covenant of Redemption in its organization and operation avails itself of the structures and processes in which man's cultural history unfolds. It does so, however, in different ways in different ages.

In Old Testament times the redemptive covenant actually embodied itself in one or another cultural authority structure. These cultural units did not comprise the unbroken totality of culture as in the pre-redemptive age, but the covenant and the particular cultural unit did coalesce. As authority structures they were one and coextensive. Thus, the structure of the Abrahamic Covenant was identical with that of the patriarch's authority sphere. And since the covenant took over as its own structure the existing social structure with Abraham as head of the household-community, Abraham was also head over the covenantal community, and covenantal government included (even at the human level) cultural-physical sanctions. In the course of time the patriarchal societal form was replaced by the kingdom of Israel, household authorities being now supplemented by various kingdom authorities. But the covenant structure was still one and the same as this more complex cultural form. In fact, it was the covenant revelation through Moses that had legislatively molded this cultural form of Israel with a view to the typological purposes of the covenant and its history in that pre-messianic age.

This is not to deny that the servant of God fulfills his cultural vocation as a covenantal service in the name of his Lord, but it is to recognize that the Covenant of Redemption exists in this world at present as a distinct and limited organizational entity in the midst of other non-covenantal institutions. Nor is the recognition of such non-covenantal institutions a denial of the lordship of Christ over all institutions; it simply distinguishes between the Covenant of Redemption as a specific historical program and confessional institution and the more fundamental and comprehensive Covenant of the Kingdom. (Cf. my "Law Covenant", p. 18.) In terms of the latter Christ is Lord, yes, even covenantal Lord, over all.


See the Deuteronomic stipulations regulative of Israel's government, especially 17:14 ff. Cf. I Sam. 10:17 ff.
In New Testament times there is no longer a simple coalescence of the authority structure of the covenant with that of any cultural unit. Although the New Covenant honors parental authority and works through it, the government of the New Covenant, even at the human level, is not limited to that (or to any more comprehensive) cultural form. For the New Covenant adds a system of special, strictly cultic, officers as a second, and indeed dominant, focus of its human authority structure. The New Covenant thus has a cultural authority focus in the covenant family and a cultic authority focus in the assembled, worshipping congregation with its special officers.

The latter feature is a significantly new development in the pattern of covenant authority. The Mosaic Covenant too had its special authorities in addition to the parent householders of Israel, but that additional authority was not of a non-cultural nature. For it was the authority of a visible, earthly kingdom and as such it had recourse to economic and corporal, including capital, sanctions. The kingdom of Israel was, of course, not another Caesar-kingdom but, uniquely, the Kingdom of God institutionally present among the nations. Its earthly cultural form was symbolic of the ultimate integration of culture and cult in the world of the consummation. The judicial infliction of cultural sanctions by its officers typified the final messianic judgment of men in the totality of their being as cultural creatures. This institutional symbolization of the final judgment and eternal kingdom disappeared from the earthly scene when the Old Covenant gave way to the New. In this age of the church, royal theocratic authority with its prerogative of imposing physical-cultural sanctions resides solely in Christ the heavenly King. The judicial authority of the permanent special officers whom

135 The covenant as the lordship of Christ over his individual servants spans the kingdom-cultural and the church-cultic. These two areas even overlap institutionally in the authority structure of the covenant family. Nevertheless, until the eschatological reintegration of culture and cultus on a universal scale, the covenant people must distinguish between those functions they perform as members of the church (i.e., the covenant institution in the total unity of its dual foci of authority) and their more general kingdom activities.
Christ has appointed to serve his church on earth is purely spiritual-cultic.

Cultural sanctions have no place, therefore, in the functioning of the central and dominant cultic authority focus of the New Covenant. And to introduce the sword or other cultural sanctions into the New Covenant's pattern of human authority in connection with its minor, household focus of authority would be alien to the distinctive spirit of the Covenant and its mission in the present age. The authority of the parent over the child involves no difficulty on this score since it is a spiritual-moral suasion. If the enforcement of parental authority has its corporal aspect, even that is not civil or judicial. But the authority of a master over a slave is fundamentally a civic-economic authority, violations of which are judiciable in civil court and enforceable by the state's judicial sanctions. This cultural authority structure may not, therefore, be endowed with covenantal character in this age.

Hence we would judge that in the administration of the New Covenant and particularly of the New Covenant's sign of baptism, the believing master's authority over his servant is not reckoned as a covenantal authority. The servant, therefore, is not to be baptized on the basis of his household relationship to a Christian master.

Conclusions: The administration of baptism as the sign of demarcation of the congregation of the New Covenant takes account of both personal confession and of the confessor's temporal authority. Just as there had to be an Abraham as the confessing nucleus of the Abrahamic covenant community marked by circumcision, so there had to be a nuclear company of disciples who confessed Christ as Lord for the establishment of the church of the New Covenant sealed by baptism. So too in the continuing mission of that church among new families and peoples, the administering of the sign of covenantal incorporation awaits the emergence of the confession of Christ's lordship. But though the confession of faith has this primacy in the administration of baptism it is not the exclusive principle regulative of this rite. For the one who confesses Christ is required to fulfill his responsibility with respect to those whom God has placed under his parental
authority, exercising that authority to consecrate his charges with himself to the service of Christ. The basis for the baptism of the children of believers is thus simply their parents' covenantal authority over them.

For those who are baptized according to the secondary principle of authority as well as for those who are baptized according to the primary principle of confession, baptism is a sign of incorporation within the judicial sphere of Christ's covenant lordship for a final verdict of blessing or curse. At the same time, the significance of the reception of baptism in the two cases will differ as active consecration differs from passive consignment.

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ONE'S understanding of the church affects one's understanding of baptism. Therefore I propose to open further discussion between paedobaptists and Baptists by an indirect route, through looking at the church and its membership.

In comparison with New Testament standards, our practice concerning church membership can be either too loose (indifferentist) or too restrictive (rigorist). Errors of both kinds arise from poor understanding of the roots of communal Christian life. Hence we start by examining those roots.

I. The Heart of the Church

Genuine Christian community arises from the power of God. Through the Holy Spirit we are united to Christ and participate in “every spiritual blessing” in the heavenly realms in Christ (Eph 1:3). Our union with Christ also unites us to Christian brothers and sisters, and makes us part of one family under God (1 Cor 12). Hence, at the heart of the church stands our union with Christ.1

Jesus Christ is Lord over the church (Eph 5:24). The church is not a private club, with rules determined in whatever way the members wish, but a community ruled by Christ. Hence, membership in a visible Christian community ought to be determined not by an arbitrary set of rules and regulations, nor by the autonomous decision of Christian leaders, but by the authority of Christ. We are obliged to receive all whom Christ instructs us to receive. And conversely, we are obliged to exclude those whom Christ instructs us to exclude. We receive repentant sinners, even though they are imperfect, while we exclude upstanding, moral, self-sufficient “righteous” people who refuse to acknowledge Christ’s saving work.

Because union with Christ is at the heart of our salvation, some people have inferred that the church consists only of those who are regenerate, that

1 In my discussion I will presuppose that Reformed theology accurately represents the Bible’s teaching about salvation. God promises that all those who are savingly united to Christ will persevere to the end (Matt 10:22) and be saved at the last day (John 6:39,51,54,58; Rom 8:28-29). People who disagree will still be able to follow large amounts of my argument; but they must understand that my argument uses terminology consonant with Reformed theology.
is, only those savingly united to Christ. But only God knows perfectly who
these people are. "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Tim 2:19) — but
we do not. In fact, the visible church includes wolves and hypocrites as well
as the genuine sheep (that is, those who are regenerate). 1 John 2:19 indi-
cates that some people "went out from us, but they did not really belong
to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us;
but their going showed that none of them belonged to us." These people
were not regenerate: "none of them belonged to us." But they were for a
time members of the visible church: "they would have remained with us.”
Similarly, in Acts 20:29-30 Paul warns that "savage wolves will come in
among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will
arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.”

II. Continuation in the Church

If in practice the church does include some unregenerate people, how
does church life work? Life continues through continued union with Christ
(Col 2:6). As we hear about the grace and power and beauty of Christ, faith
and repentance are renewed, hearts are cleansed, spiritual blessings are
received, and obedience is deepened. Thus we are to "encourage one an-
other daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be
hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb 3:13). This exhortation includes both
formal sermons and informal occasions for fellowship.

Suppose now that, after the manner in 1 John 2:18-19, someone has
slipped into the community whose heart was not, in the sight of God,
genuinely renewed. Renewal might still take place as the person hears the
gospel set forth. If someone backslides into sin and lack of repentance, the
same gospel is the remedy for his backsliding. If we love people, we will
rebuke them for sin and warn of its soul-destroying effects. We will endeavor
also to point to Christ as the remedy for their sin. Through such exhorta-
tions Christ may give life to people in all conditions — the unregenerate, the
regenerate but backslidden, and the regenerate who are growing. We ought
always to endeavor to fit our words to the particular needs of the person
(Col 4:5-6). But for practical purposes we never need to know infallibly
whether people are regenerate or unregenerate.

In all such circumstances we ought to treat all church members as Chris-
tians. We give them the love and affection, and also the exhortation, encourage-
ment, and rebuke, that we owe to other members of our spiritual family. If
they sin, we exhort them as brothers (1 Tim 5:1-2). If, however, rebukes do
not lead to repentance, the unrepentant person must ultimately be cast
out of the Christian fellowship and treated as an outsider (Matt 18:15-17;
1 Cor 5:5). Even then, we do not know infallibly the state of such a person’s
heart. In theory, an excommunicated person could still be a regenerate
person in serious sin, whom the Lord will yet bring to repentance through
his discipline. Note, for example, 1 Tim 1:20, where Paul holds out the
posi.

In this interaction, membership in the church does make a difference. We are to treat members as Christians and outsiders as non-Christians. We have different responsibilities and duties, assigned by God, depending on whether they share in our Christian community with its fellowship and worship.

We may also note two errors to be avoided. First, we must avoid rigorism. That is, we must avoid requiring everyone to show immediately the full maturity, purity, and consistency in righteousness that come only through Christian growth. The church on earth is a hospital for sinners, not a roll of those already perfected.

Second, we must avoid indifference toward sin. Just because people have professed faith in Christ and joined the Christian community, continued sin does not become less serious. If anything, it becomes more serious, since it is an insult to Christ the Lord of the church (Heb 10:26-31).

We ought not to say, “Well, they are regenerate, so God will take care of them no matter what. We need not exert ourselves to rebuke them.” For one thing, we do not know infallibly whether other people are regenerate. In addition, God has designed the process of encouragement and rebuke within the Christian community to be a means by which he enables the faithful to persevere and causes the erring to repent.

We have additional reasons to rebuke people rather than merely leaving them. Leaving a brother or sister in sin is plainly unloving. It is contrary to Christ’s command to love each other, and contrary to the explicit instructions in Matt 18:12-18 and Luke 17:3.

These two errors, indifferentism and rigorism, so opposite in appearance, are in fact two sides of the same coin. We raise the standards of admission to the church unnaturally high (the rigorist error) in order that we may thereafter be able to presume that those who are members are perfectly all right regardless of their continued behavior (the indifferentist error).

III. Entrance into the Church through Credible Profession of Faith

Now let us consider entrance into the church. Who is to be allowed to enter the church? We welcome those whom Christ instructs us to welcome. Fundamentally, we welcome the same kind of people who are already in the church. We welcome those who are committed to the gospel and to the process of encouragement and rebuke through which we help one another to persevere.

Hence, the proper practice is to admit adults to the church and to Christian baptism when they give a “credible profession of faith.” They “profess faith,” that is, they acknowledge that they trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for
their salvation. But the leaders or examiners of candidates need not make infallibly sure of the genuineness of this faith. Indeed, they cannot, since no one knows his own heart perfectly, let alone the hearts of others (Jer 17:9). Nor should the examiners try to detect infallible traces of the work of the Holy Spirit at the moment of regeneration. For, as John 3:8 tells us, the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit is deeply mysterious, and is known by us only through its effects, not in its ultimate origins.

Moreover, adult professions of faith ought to be "credible," believable. That is, they must not be undermined by obvious disobedience, lack of repentance, or lack of whole-hearted submission to the Lord. But of course the tests of such credibility must remain reasonable. When leaders examine new converts, they might quite quickly detect areas where people’s speech, their emotional life, and their family life need purging and spiritual growth. For a new convert, credibility does not mean perfection; it means believable willingness on the part of the convert to follow Christ along the road of progressive obedience and progressive sanctification. It is enough that converts have taken the first step, not that they have already proved themselves all at once to have reached the middle or the end of the road.

Here as elsewhere, we must avoid the twin errors of indifferentism and rigorism. First, there is indifferentism. If we do not require profession or credible evidence of repentance, we show indifference. We do not take seriously the fact that Christ rebukes sin.

Second, there is rigorism. We may try to admit only those who are regenerate. But we do not know infallibly who is regenerate. Do we then try to raise our standards to exclude as many hypocrites as possible? We may make the standards higher and higher, in order to exclude cases with the least possible doubt. But the result is that we require at the beginning maturity that Christ brings only along the way.

Rigorism simply misunderstands Christian growth and perseverance. It has a false conception of the purity of the church. It has too much confidence in the ability of leaders to discern people’s hearts, and simultaneously too little confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit within the community to bring about growth and to bring about excommunication in cases of lack of repentance.

Rigorism is bad, but it is nevertheless fairly common in evangelical churches. Many, many evangelicals may sincerely want to avoid rigorism in their hearts and in their personal attitudes. But they nevertheless practice rigorism at those times when they formally admit people to church membership. People who become members must agree to a large number of doctrinal standards that the church holds. These standards constitute a rigoristic barrier.

To many church leaders, it seems that there is no good alternative to rigorism. If we admit people easily, then these people through their doctrinal errors will corrupt the doctrine of the church. Hence we would show that we were indifferent to good doctrine. On the other hand, if we require
thorough doctrinal understanding before we admit people to membership, we practice rigoristic exclusiveness. We become a sect, a private club, by excluding many people whom Christ himself freely receives as brothers and sisters in the faith (Rom 8:29; Heb 2:12).

The biblical answer is to distinguish the qualifications of church leaders, the elders, from the qualifications of nonleaders. Elders ought to be not only sound in doctrine (Tit 1:9), but exemplary in their personal lives and family management (1 Tim 3:1-7). Obviously, not every Christian is qualified to be an elder. (There would be no reason for the instructions in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 if it were assumed that everyone who is a member of the church is equally qualified to rule and to make the crucial spiritual decisions in the life of the church!)

The Bible’s teaching implies that some modern churches must change their practice of leadership and governance. Churches that have no elders must appoint elders with biblical qualifications. Churches that in practice have the whole congregation vote to decide all issues must somehow make sure that elders have an important role. The exact formal arrangements for the role of elders might perhaps vary. But in terms of spiritual realities, we must respect the greater maturity, wisdom, and doctrinal solidity that God has given to some of the older Christians. Otherwise, the weakest and most immature members of the church become a weighty influence against sound doctrine. We become indifferentist by placing control of the church in the hands of the immature. Or else we become rigorist by refusing to admit the immature into the full spiritual privileges of church membership.

Making such changes is not merely a trivial issue. It is the only sound way to avoid the twin dangers of indifferentism and rigorism. That is, it is the only sound way consistently to express Christ’s love in the body. Such changes may be painful; they may offend Americans’ naive views that everyone is equally qualified for everything. But Jesus did not promise that following him would always be easy or painless.

IV. Evaluating Professions of Faith

Now let us consider in greater detail how we are to evaluate professions of faith. What is credible depends on the person and the circumstances. Suppose that a college professor and a mentally retarded adult come before church leaders to be examined. The mentally retarded adult may give only a very simple statement of faith, “Jesus died to take away my badness. Now he is alive. He loves me. He promises to take me to heaven.” The college professor, on the other hand, may be more elaborate. In fact, if he were unable to elaborate, we might start asking questions. “Don’t you want to learn more about Christ and his greatness? If Christ is Lord, don’t you see that your intellectual life must be conformed to what he wants?”

Similarly, an expression of faith from a 19-year-old boy, a 12-year-old, and a 6-year-old must each be treated in its own way. Concerning each of
these, we know that much growth must follow the initial expression of faith. Membership in the Christian community and participation in its family life contributes to this growth. If the growth did not take place, or if there were a rebellion against Christ at a later stage, it would call in question the genuineness of the earlier commitment. But the same is true of normal adults.

In fact, each crisis in life presents us with opportunities to renew and deepen our faith. In any crisis or new challenge, we should try to discover anew the riches and mercy of Christ as they apply to our situation. The 6-year-old girl later reaches puberty. As a teenager she goes away to college. She gets her first full-time job after graduation. She gets married. She has her first child. Someone in the family gets seriously sick or dies. Finally, she confronts old age and the prospect of her own imminent death. In each new circumstance Christ confronts her with the challenge to realize afresh his power, his forgiveness, and his comfort. Moreover, the church, the Christian community, ought to stand alongside and be a channel for helping us confront these challenges and respond to them with deeper faith and obedience.

We welcome people while they are still on the way. We do not wait until they have faced all the crises and then say, “Now we are sure that your faith is genuine.” Naturally, in the Bible and in the church’s teaching we repeatedly hold up examples of mature faith, faith at its deepest and most fervent. We want these examples as models and goals. But we understand instinctively that such maturity comes only gradually, through growth (cf. Phil 3:10-15). It is not to be required instantaneously of a newly converted adult, nor is it to be required of a young person, either a teenager or a child.

Something about the nature of genuine faith also becomes evident through these reflections. Genuine faith, saving faith, includes in its mature and adult form vigorous intellectual apprehension. As adults, we believe many facts and many truths about God and about his promises to us in the Bible. But faith is genuine long before intellectual apprehension reaches its completion. Faith in Christ is trust in a person, not merely assent to a system of doctrine. Trust in a person normally includes some knowledge about the person—propositions. But the ability verbally to articulate such knowledge varies with age and verbal skill. College professors express their faith more articulately than the mentally retarded adult or the 5-year-old child. Christ saves us; our verbal or intellectual abilities as such do not.

It is easy for us to become confused about such matters. It is easy to put improper emphasis on intellectual and verbal apprehension of the truth. When we look at children, we naturally hope that their intellectual apprehension of God’s truth will grow, and that their faith will come to maturity. We encourage such growth. Our hopes and our encouragement are quite proper. But if we equate intellectual maturity with the essence of faith, we change salvation from a free gift into the property of those with proper intellectual credentials. And then we contradict the gospel, which tells of
God's mercy to the undeserving, mercy that utterly ignores all supposed human credentials and vaunted abilities (Rom 9:11-12; Tit 3:5-7).

In sum, we must adjust our expectations concerning credible profession when we are dealing with people with less intellectual ability, whether they are children or the mentally retarded. To make such adjustments is simply an implication of Christian love. In love we learn to meet other people on their level and in their capacities; we do not insist that they be like us in every way.

V. Young Children

Let us then consider the situation with young children. We need to listen accurately to young children. Listen to the young children within your church, the children who are being raised in solid Christian homes. Talk with the 5-year-olds. Talk with the 3-year-olds. Talk with the 2-year-olds. Ask them about what Jesus has done for them. Ask whether they love Jesus. Ask whether Jesus loves them. I think that you will hear a lot of credible professions of faith. To be sure, you may have to make some adjustments in interpreting their statements. Many children in evangelical circles have been taught primarily to use the language of "loving Jesus" rather than "trusting Jesus for salvation." But they do think that Jesus is trustworthy, and their love therefore includes an element of trust. "Salvation" may be a difficult word for them, but they know that Jesus can deal with their badness. They cannot articulate the full theology of substitutionary atonement, but they have a basic confidence that Jesus can do whatever it takes to meet their sins. Of course, you will sometimes hear statements that are confused or doubtful, or signs that children do not know what to say. You can in love do a little teaching. Help the children to grow so that their profession is stronger and more credible.

Many of us have not really awakened to what is going on under our noses. Many of these children are Christians. Many of us don't believe so, because we demand adult or quasi-adult maturity first. But, as the above reflections have shown, such a demand is not right.

We might react by reminding ourselves that the faith of children is naive and shallow and may easily be shaken or destroyed by the crises that they will meet as they grow older. But the same is true of adults who are new to the faith. On the deepest level, the same is true of us all. We are children in comparison with what we could be. And we would fall away if the Lord did not sustain us. Again, we might object by saying that we may not receive children until we are sure that they will not in fact fall away. We will receive them as Christians only when their faith has been tested and matured. But, as we have seen above, such a procedure is not appropriate even for adults. The problems of backsliding and apostasy are fundamentally the same for adults and for children. The practical realities of backsliding and apostasy do not destroy our obligations to treat adult converts as Christians. We treat
them as Christians unless and until they prove themselves otherwise by apostasy. And we encourage, exhort, and strengthen them in every way in order to endeavor to guard them against apostasy (Heb 10:24-25). Likewise with children.

VI. Faith and Individualism

Some people might say that they hesitate with children not because children lack maturity but because they lack full individuality or autonomy in faith. In many ways, children tend to say what their parents want them to say. They believe what their parents tell them. Any profession of faith that a child makes is not totally independent. Children do not act wholly on their own. Hence, their faith seems suspect. How much is just a reflection of their parents? Can we know for sure?

In reply to this type of reasoning, we must consider several interlocking issues. First, just what does it mean to have independent, individual, or autonomous faith? If we push this criterion to an extreme, we would wait until children are old enough to be self-conscious, totally independent individuals. But when and where does such independence exist? Even adults are part of larger social groups that influence them more than we might like to admit. Married adults are not "independent individuals." In practice, many Americans might be satisfied to point to teenagers, because in American society the teenage peer group pulls teenagers strongly away from their parents. It helps make them "independent." But, ironically, they are often enslaved to peer group opinion. One must ask whether such independence is altogether a good thing!

In fact, the Bible criticizes this idea of independence quite strongly. Exod 20:12 commands us to honor our father and mother. God repeats the commandment in the New Testament (Eph 6:1-3; Col 3:20; Matt 15:4). Proverbs instructs us to respect the instruction of father, mother, and people who are older and wiser (see, e.g., Prov 1:8; 4:1-6; 4:13; 13:1; 13:20; 15:5; 15:7; 16:31). The incarnate Son testified that his own life totally repudiated "independence": "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, . . ." (John 5:19). "By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear . . ." (John 15:30). Followers of Christ must likewise radically repudiate independence in their relation to Christ: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9:24). "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Having submitted to Christ, we also submit to those through whom Christ exercises care over us: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority" (Heb 13:17). Children, in submitting to their parents, submit to God the heavenly Father as well.

The ideal of independent individualism is a peculiarly American and modern Western phenomenon. International students coming to the United States from Third World countries often remark about the extreme individualism of America. They notice it because it does not exist in their native
culture. Neither did it exist in the premodern cultures of the first-century or the Old Testament. People thought of themselves not as isolated individuals but as members and participants in a family, a lineage, a society, and a people. Making a life-changing “decision” apart from relationship to social communities would have seemed weird. Membership in the Christian church meant participation in the new “holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9) formed through Christ’s resurrection. According to Paul’s image in 1 Corinthians 12, we are members of one body, not lopped off, isolated eyes or hands or feet.

Thus, we must be suspicious and critical of this modern individualism. In fact, young children are doing exactly what God says they should be doing when they show respect for Christian parents by trusting them and imitating their faith. Precisely in such ways faith grows and matures. The children’s lack of “independence” at this point is positively desirable and praiseworthy.

These reflections lead us back to our earlier point about maturity. Genuine saving union with Jesus Christ does not require “independence,” emotional maturity, self-sufficiency, self-consciousness-of-my-own-individual-decision-indistinction-from-my-parents, or any such characteristics. Some of these may come with the process of maturing. But Christ is quite capable of meeting us right where we are, and engendering love for him without our first having to meet certain “qualifications” that characterize only some subclasses of human beings.

VII. Baptism as a Sign of Entrance into the Visible Church

Now what about baptism? Who should be baptized? Christians differ over the theological meaning and significance of baptism. Such differences obviously make it more difficult to agree about the practical use of baptism. But I believe many will at least admit this much, that in the New Testament baptism was the primary sign of initiation for admission into the church, the visible, practicing Christian community. In the first century Christians were able to distinguish insiders from outsiders. As far as we know, there were no formal membership rolls, but there was nevertheless a clear, practical distinction between the church and world. Entrance into the church came by baptism. Occasionally people had to be put out by excommunication. In the practical life of the church, there was no such thing as an unbaptized Christian.

For example, Paul says in 1 Cor 12:13, “we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body.” With these words Paul assumes that all Christians he

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2 Some strands of Greek philosophical speculation succeeded to some degree in abstracting people from their native ties; but such speculation contrasted with the perception of common people.
is addressing have been baptized. True, Paul focuses on the internal work of the Holy Spirit, rather than the external use of water in water-baptism. But his argument would lose its force if not every member of the church had been baptized. Similarly, the arguments in Rom 6:3-4, Gal 3:27, Eph 4:5, and elsewhere lose some of their punch unless Paul can rely on the fact that all the Christians he is addressing have been baptized.

Hence, baptism in the name of Jesus functions in the New Testament to mark the beginning of the Christian life. Baptism was not merely for those with mature, tested faith, but for those starting the Christian walk. Therefore, in Acts adult converts were baptized when they professed faith. Later in church history, baptism was delayed until after people had gone through catechetical training. But I believe this practice represents a deviation rather than an improvement. Most catechetical training belongs after baptism. Baptism is at the beginning, because it signifies the inception of union with Christ (Rom 6:1-4). Following baptism one enters on a whole lifetime of discipleship, including catechism or doctrinal training that brings us into deeper knowledge of the gospel and the Christian faith.

Now what do we do with children born to Christian parents? The above reasoning implies that they should be baptized at least as soon as they have a credible profession of faith. And what counts as a credible profession? Such profession could be pushed back very early, to the time soon after children begin to verbalize in sentences. If we were to operate in this way, we would not be practicing "infant baptism," but small-child baptism. It would, I believe, be an improvement on typical modern baptism practice.

Baptistic practice typically waits until children are quite a bit older. Why the delay occurs is not clear. Perhaps some baptists have simply not realized that baptism should mark the beginning of life in the Christian community. At times, however, there may be an underlying desire (perhaps not fully thought out) to have tested, mature, "adult" faith first. Such a desire is understandable, since mature faith ought indeed to be held out as a model and a goal. But we make a mistake if we confuse the goal with the minimum starting point. Such confusion is inconsistent with the whole nature of the Christian experience. Christian experience nearly always has small and stumbling beginnings. Moreover, delay in baptism is inconsistent with Christian love, which does not wait for mature proof before embracing brothers in love. It is inconsistent with Christ, who receives us when we come to him, not when we have proved ourselves mature.

3 "... baptism is a sign of beginning the Christian life and therefore of beginning life in the true church as well" (Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994] 984). Note that baptism has not always marked the beginning of keeping covenant with God. Old Testament saints enjoyed a covenantal relation to God without being baptized. Christian baptism was foreshadowed in the Old Testament by circumcision and cleansing rites. But Christian baptism as such specifically celebrates the resurrection of Christ, and is practiced only after Pentecost.
Let me put it another way. With respect to both adults and children, the Christian church is supposed to be neither indifferentist nor rigorist. In contrast to indifferentism, the church devotes itself to continual exhortation and rebuke of both adults and children. It takes seriously the danger of backsliding and apostasy. In contrast to rigorism, the church welcomes even halting professions of faith. The church has “easy” entrance requirements (antirigorism) and a “hard,” disciplined attitude toward perseverance (anti-indifferentism).

Some baptists may nevertheless not agree. They want another solution. They do admit that young children may be believers. They are quite willing to receive them as brothers in the family of God, and to respect their role in the family of God. But they do not want to baptize them just yet. To this position the reply must be, “Why do you not baptize them?” The delay of baptism is hypocritical. You say that you see these people as fellow Christians, and that they are in the family of God. Your words say it, but your action denies it. Withholding baptism says in action that they are not in the family of God.

The only other option is to try to change the meaning of baptism from a sign of initiation to a badge of maturity. Then one has a two-level Christianity, consisting of baptized and unbaptized Christians. The baptized are the mature, and the unbaptized are the immature scum. This two level approach utterly misses the point of Luke 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 12 (note especially 12:13).

VIII. Paedobaptist Practice

I believe that paedobaptists as well as baptists must improve their practice in this area. Since paedobaptists baptize the infant children of believers, they may think that they are immune from these problems. It is true that they do not confront exactly the same problems. But they must still be concerned about what to do when young children from non-Christian families profess faith. And they must watch for indifferentism and rigorism expressing themselves in other ways.

Many paedobaptists practice indifferentism by saying to themselves that their children have been baptized and are therefore “safe.” They thereby convert baptism or church membership into careless presumption about salvation. This presumption is contrary to the warnings of Hebrews.

Others may be tempted to rigorism. They view baptized children as members of the church only “formally,” while in practice they think of them as sub-Christian until they reach teenage years and go through the rite of confirmation. In many instances paedobaptists describe confirmation as “joining the church” or “becoming a member of the church,” when in

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4 I have even heard of situations where parents allow their children to partake of the Lord’s Supper, on the basis of their faith; but the children remain unbaptized.
actual fact the people about to be presented in a confirmation ceremony
have already joined the church and are already members, for they have
been baptized as infants. The thinking that they are not yet members of
the church seems to reveal a subtle form of rigorism.

Avoiding subtle forms of indifferentism and rigorism requires love, and
there are no short-cuts to loving. Learning to love is a life-long process of
spiritual growth (Eph 4:11-16).

IX. Baptistic Practice

Baptists have more difficult problems. If I am right, they must change
their practice on baptism by baptizing even very young children who can
give a credible profession of faith. Fortunately, some are already moving in
this direction. I am informed that scattered individuals and congregations
are already baptizing children as young as four years old, and more may
be in the process of moving in this direction. Such movement is encour-
aging. I hope that many more baptists will come to understand the biblical
reasons for such a move.

We might still ask why baptists have historically been reluctant to bap-
tize younger children. Within historically baptistic circles the practice of
baptizing children of preschool age has been a rare exception, at least until
recently. Yet such withholding of baptism is unbiblical. Why this consistent
inconsistency? Something is clearly operating here under the surface. The
most plausible explanation is that many baptistic communities may be in
the grip of some corporate distortion of the meaning of baptism. If so, it
behooves baptists to change, not only for the sake of biblical consistency,
but for the sake of altering this corporate distortion.

In actual practice, change might often come gradually. Let us picture a
typical case. Change starts when the elders or leaders in a baptist church
become convinced of several related truths: that baptism marks the incep-
tion of life with Christ and the joining of the church; that credible profesi-
on of faith rather than infallible evidence of regeneration is required; that
credible profession must be appropriate to the age and gifts of the person;
that faith consists primarily in trust in Christ rather than intellectual mas-
tery, precise verbal articulation of the truth, or self-conscious, autonomous
decision-making.

With this conviction, the elders start looking at children with new eyes.
They baptize some children six, seven, and eight years old. They find a
spiritually mature five-year-old boy. After they have examined him, he is
baptized. It is the first time the congregation has seen someone baptized
that young. Some people are astonished, but they adjust to it.

After a time, they find a spiritually mature four-year-old girl. She is
baptized. Some people in the congregation raise some questions. The leaders
give some explanations. The adults in the congregation start to change their
attitude. They start encouraging their children to profess faith in Christ
early. More young children start being presented to the elders. The elders start feeling more comfortable with what they can expect of children. More four-year-olds get baptized.

Then come some bad repercussions. Some parents start thinking, "Why isn't my child baptized when he is already six?"! They start competing and trying to pressure their children artificially. But the problems are discussed. People are counseled to be patient. Things settle down. In the process, a good sort of zeal arises. Parents start praying earnestly and expectantly for their children to be saved at an early age. Parents take more care to instruct their children, beginning even at a very early age. More Bible stories are read and discussed at home. Parents are given instruction and examples of how to make their teaching appropriate to the children's age. Parents learn more about helping their children overcome sin, sins of selfishness, disobedience, and ingratitude. As a result, the children start growing spiritually at earlier ages. Parents are encouraged and start praying more.

Some of the three-year-olds are doing very well spiritually. The elders start baptizing these three-year-olds. More questions come. More explanations come from the elders. The church settles into this new practice.

The elders have now adjusted to what Christian faith is like when it comes from a three-year-old. Over a period of time, they realize what Christian faith is like from a two-year-old. The two-year-olds start getting baptized.

Practicing Christian love means not only loving small children, but also loving the adults who have difficulty adjusting to changes. If one person within a particular congregation becomes convinced that young professors should be baptized, that person should not try immediately to force the practice on everyone else; we should not just bulldoze a path without taking account of the views of others. Rather, we are to exercise patience with those who disagree. Hence, an adjustment that takes time may actually be more loving and more honoring to the Lord than an adjustment that takes place suddenly, all in one big step, by an autocratic imposition from a head pastor. It is legitimate for adjustment to be gradual. But adjustment must come, in order to practice love toward the young children.

X. Benefits of Changing Practice

If baptists change their practice in this area, there may be exciting results of various kinds. I believe that this change honors God. Hence, blessings are bound to follow. The sins of indifferentism and rigorism are pushed back, and spiritual growth takes place.

The change also opens prospects for rapprochement between baptists and paedobaptists. For one thing, when baptists deal seriously with the sins of indifferentism and rigorism, it encourages paedobaptists likewise to deal with similar sins within their own hearts and their own practice. Paedobaptists eliminate indifferentism in their own ranks partly by exhorting and
training their baptized children. They try to teach them again and again to trust in Christ. They endeavor to deepen and strengthen their faith. This process in turn encourages the baptists. One main concern of baptists is that the children in paedobaptist churches may be considered “safe” in an indifferentist sense. They may not then be challenged with respect to believing in Christ. To see the paedobaptists practicing diligence in this area is surely reassuring.

Baptists and paedobaptists thus begin to draw together because both are more adequately shepherding their children. They may still dispute about whether to baptize children under two-years-old. But they may encourage one another and learn a lot from what they are doing with children who are already baptized, two-years-old and older.

I believe that God requires both sides to change. Both sides must grow. Both sides must help the other side grow.

But many baptists may still feel that they are doing more changing than are the paedobaptists. And in a sense they are right. Changing a traditional pattern concerning baptism requires considerable adjustment. I believe we can hope to see change in several respects.

First, we change in our view of spiritual war. A modern national army normally consists only of adults. But in the spiritual war of Eph 6:10-20, God calls all members of the body to participate. Children must learn to submit to Christ, to pray, and to fight sin from earliest childhood. In this matter we must avoid both indifferentism and rigorism. In indifferentism we may imagine that children may be safely ignored, that they do not really have to fight sin until they are older. We may neglect praying for them or expecting consistent obedience from them. Or in rigorism we may despise their contribution to war, until they can prove that they are toughened adults. But we would then be misunderstanding spiritual war, and ignoring the fact that God gives special protection to the weak (Isa 40:11).

Second, we change our view of church membership. Opening baptism to young professors reminds us vividly that we are all still in the process of growth, that we need one another, and that we must take responsibility to help others to grow. We see more clearly that the church is a body where there is room for the immature as well as the mature. We see also that the boundary between the world and the visible church matters. Church membership is not a matter of indifference, but a matter of submitting to Christ and to the ministry that Christ gives to us through other members of the body.

Admitting the immature also reminds us that the church is not a private club that can set its own standards in whatever way it chooses. Its standards are determined by Christ. The admission of immature people into our own group also reinforces our obligation to extend fellowship to other adults in other churches and other denominations. We do not wait until people agree with us in every point of doctrine before being willing to recognize them as Christians and admit them into common membership with us. Thus we appreciate more our solidarity with other Christian churches.
Third, we change our view of baptism itself. Before, it may be that we thought of baptism mostly as an experience for the person baptized. As we saw it, the people being baptized testify to their faith and also have their faith confirmed through reflecting on the meaning of their baptism. These elements may still be in mind when small children are baptized. But if personal experience is the only thing that matters, it would clearly be expedient to delay baptism until the baptized person was very mature spiritually. Then their own testimony would be richer, and their understanding of baptism would be richer. The experience as a whole would be richer. Hence why not delay baptism as long as possible?

The observation that baptism belongs at the beginning of the Christian life puts a stop to such reasonings. If people are baptized when they initially become Christians, they can never fully appreciate baptism at the time. Full appreciation comes only later. This truth becomes particularly evident with small children, because they so clearly must grow afterwards. On the other hand, when adults are baptized, we can easily fool ourselves into thinking that they are already mature spiritually, because they look mature physically.

Hence, baptism is not merely a subjective performance of the person being baptized. What is it? The church, not merely the individual, practices baptism. More pointedly, we might say that Christ baptizes us into his body, and that the church is only his instrument in accomplishing baptism. The church identifies the members of the body by the sign of baptism. The person who is baptized appreciates baptism not primarily by having a maximally rich subjective personal experience at the time of baptism, but by continually remembering that he has been baptized and is bound by divine obligations to the body of believers and to Christ himself.

When Baptists begin changing their practice and their thinking in these matters, still another issue confronts them. What do you do about rebaptism? Many Baptists prefer to rebaptize adults who have been baptized as infants. Many also will rebaptize under other conditions. Adults may have earlier been baptized as adults or teenagers, but are now not sure whether they were regenerate at the time of the earlier baptism. They are then rebaptized in order that baptism may chronologically follow the point of regeneration.

I personally have seen cases where adults are rebaptized for still another reason. In these cases there is no serious doubt that people were regenerate at the time of their earlier baptism, but they request and receive rebaptism because they have since grown in the faith and want to testify anew to their faith in Christ through a new commitment. Their commitment is also accompanied by a deeper understanding of baptism. In such cases, it seems

\[5\] During the years that I was growing up my parents and I were members of several evangelical Baptist churches. I am grateful for the spiritual nourishment that they gave me, and I have a continuing love and respect for their ministry. Whatever criticisms I have are minor in comparison to what we hold together.
that they want baptism not only to follow regeneration but to follow a mature understanding of baptism. People want their baptism to be a rich subjective experience. Their original baptism was not such an experience, because at the time they lacked the spiritual maturity necessary to appreciate it richly and to experience it deeply.

Such practices may seem appealing, but they are unbiblical. In the New Testament there is no instance of doubling Christian baptism. Such doubling contradicts the nature of baptism as an intrinsically unrepeatable initiation (Rom 6:2-3; Gal 3:27; 1 Cor 12:13; Eph 4:5).

Baptizing small children helps indirectly to put a stop to the unbiblical practice of rebaptism. As we have seen, the focus is no longer exclusively on the personal experience of the one being baptized. It becomes clear that rich subjective understanding of baptism is not absolutely necessary. Moreover, baptizing small children puts more focus on what the church does, rather than simply on what the child does. The church is joining new members to itself. Since joining takes place only once, rebaptism is clearly inappropriate.

In addition, it is clearer in the case of children that we cannot have infallible knowledge of another person’s regeneration. Hence we are not so tempted to demand as an absolute rule that regeneration precede baptism in order for a baptism to be valid.

Baptizing small children may also operate against rebaptism more indirectly, by reducing the idea of rebaptism to absurdity. After they are baptized, small children need lots of growth along the road to maturity. After they go through each crisis in growth, they may come to feel as if they never knew Christ deeply before their crisis. Rigorists will suggest, “Maybe they were not regenerate until this latest crisis. Since we cannot know with absolute certainty that they were regenerate before, let us make sure by baptizing them again.” Children might end by getting rebaptized five, six, even ten times. The absurd, bizarre character of such a practice speaks against it. People may therefore be more willing to stick with one baptism, because that is the only defensible alternative.

These changes in viewpoint also affect our attitude toward Christians who transfer from other churches. Such Christians may not be as mature as we would like. They may not be as doctrinally sound as we would like. We are therefore tempted to be rigoristic toward them. But once we have avoided rigorism with children, it becomes easier to avoid with adults as well. Yes, we ask for a credible profession of faith. But no, we do not attempt to settle all points of doctrine first, before we receive them. “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God”

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6 Acts 19:1-7 records an instance where disciples had received John’s baptism, and subsequently Christian baptism. But only one baptism, the second, was “into the name of the Lord Jesus” (19:4). The narrative serves to show only that John’s baptism was not identical with Christian baptism.
(Rom 15:7). "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters" (Rom 14:1).

Among such disputable matters is the mode of baptism—do we immerse, do we sprinkle, or both? We may have our convictions on these matters. But the correct answer is not obvious. In view of the occurrence of the Greek root for *baptize* in Mark 7:4 and Luke 11:38, it is clear that the words for "baptize" and "baptism" do not always mean immersion.7 Since the New Testament does not directly and obviously teach the exclusive validity of one mode, the question of mode is a disputable matter in the sense of Rom 14:1.8 To insist on agreement as to mode prior to receiving a brother is to be rigoristic and unloving, by the standard of Rom 14:1 and 15:4.

Similar considerations, I would reckon, lead to not rebaptizing people who have been baptized in infancy.9 We have seen that the temporal order of regeneration-followed-by-baptism is not essential to the practice of baptism. Baptism can be valid even if the order is reversed. Hence, there is no necessity for requiring rebaptism.

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The lexical difficulty can be illustrated by simply trying to translate Mark 7:4 and Luke 11:38 as if βάπτισε mean "immerse": "When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they immerse [βαπτίσωταί]" (Mark 7:4); "But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus was not first immersed [διάβαπτισθη] before the meal, was surprised" (Luke 11:38). In fact, the Pharisees washed before eating. But it is completely unrealistic as well as unhistorical to imagine that they immersed their whole body in water.

8 Grudem implies that immersion is the proper mode, but also maintains that the differences ought not to lead to church division (*Systematic Theology*, 967). Thus he substantially agrees with my view on the issue of accepting baptisms that took place using an "incorrect" mode.

9 Ibid., 963.
LINKING SMALL CHILDREN WITH INFANTS IN THE THEOLOGY OF BAPTIZING

Vern Sheridan Poythress

In a previous article, "Indifferentism and Rigorism,"1 I argued that we should baptize small children who give a credible profession of faith in Christ. Since Christian faith is primarily trust rather than intellectual mastery, even a young child can give a credible profession. In judging what is credible leaders must take into account the capacities of the one who is expressing faith.

As a result of change among both baptists and paedobaptists, we may hope to see some degree of rapprochement. But undeniable differences still remain. What, now, is to be done with very young infants before they can talk, or shortly after they speak their first words? We still have a troubling question here.

I. The status of infants

Within the Reformed tradition, a considerable number of people have set forth arguments in favor of paedobaptism (baptizing infant children of believers).2 I believe that their arguments are worthy. But many people, including Reformed baptists, are still not persuaded.3 I would therefore like to explore a complementary approach. We start not with the promise to Abraham but with the preceding reflections about children.

However, our reflections still do not include infants. Nor is it possible directly to extend the argument to them. How do we know how they are

receiving the gospel? How could the Holy Spirit be working in them before the time when they have come to some degree of mastery of at least a fragment of human language? The answer is not so clear.

People may still be influenced by a pattern that has been set in motion with respect to older children. I personally found that my own attitude altered once I began to reckon with 2- and 3- and 4-year-olds. Instinctively I could not withdraw from 1-month- and 3-month-old-infants the welcome that I have just given to children who were a little older. Perhaps my reaction was due partly to the fact that I could sense how the work of God's Spirit might mysteriously extend into regions that we cannot penetrate rationally.

We have seen already that faith is not confined to those who can verbalize their faith. An adult who is able to hear but not to speak might have faith. Faith is primarily trust in Christ, not verbal articulation of that trust. Moreover, trust can be manifested and demonstrated by nonverbal actions as well as by verbal confession. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac demonstrated the reality of his faith (James 2:21).

For very young children, the children's response to their parents is the primary avenue for expressing their relation to God. Parents represent God to their children, by virtue of their authority, their responsibilities, and their role as a channel for God's blessings. Children first learn what God is like primarily through their parents' love and discipline. The fatherhood of God is represented through a good human father. God's forgiveness of sins is represented primarily through the parents' forgiveness and patience towards their children.

It makes a great deal of difference whether the parents are Christians. If they are, they pray for their children in the name and power of Christ, they speak to them of Christ, and they endeavor to bring Christ's love to their children through their own ministry of Christian love. Children are immersed in an atmosphere of Christian ministry—we might say church ministry—from the beginning.

Thus, in theory the idea of "credible profession" might be pushed back early. Young children can demonstrate faith even through nonverbal actions of loving their parents. John the Baptist demonstrated the work of the Holy Spirit in his life when he leaped in the womb (Luke 1:15,44). For a very young child, trust in God is very much fused with trust in parents. Trust in parents is largely inchoate and inarticulate. But it is nonetheless real.

Children trust their parents in comprehensive fashion. They trust that their parents will provide for them, care for them, nourish them, love them, forgive them, and look after them in every way. And such trust, one might easily argue, implicitly includes trust in the fullness that the parents bring to bear for the children's benefit when they muster other resources besides their own. If trust is inclusive, it includes trust in the resources of the
Christian community that the parents know how to call on, and trust in the resources of God himself in whom the parents trust and whose aid they constantly invoke.

It might seem that I have pushed hard in the direction of finding genuine faith even in very young children. But it would be artificial and speculative to place any great weight on demonstrating the character of the child's response. It is much more important that we recognize that God can meet and spiritually bless such young children. Obviously the very young child is more passive, and the signs of response may be very vague. But the blessing of God, his spiritual care, rebuke, comfort, and strengthening are quite vividly real, as they come largely through the channel of the child's parents. To a large extent, these very young children are receiving the substance of the care that ought to characterize participation in the Christian community.

The experience of the Christian community also shows what happens to children who are raised in this kind of environment. Let us suppose that the parents and the larger community are diligent in practicing their faith and rearing children "in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). Let us suppose that they are diligent in praying for their children to be saved and to grow spiritually. Then the children will be professing faith in Christ when they are two and three and four. There are no four-year-old apostates in a healthy Christian community.

Infants do not directly manifest their faith by verbal confession. But the prayers of their parents, the training of their parents, and the power of the Holy Spirit in the Christian community are evidence that they will give credible professions by the time they are a few years old. One might then argue that this evidence is in practice just as convincing as a verbal confession. There is no more danger that the children will apostasize when four years old than that an adult convert would apostasize after four years in the faith.

One might therefore argue that we should baptize infants on the grounds that their parents and the community have prayed for their salvation and have in other ways committed themselves to giving the spiritual nourishment that should accompany prayer. To the eye of faith, these prayers and the merciful character of Christ are solid evidence of what Christ will do through these children in the rest of their life. It is just as reasonable to believe that they will grow in faith as it is reasonable to believe that a newly converted adult will grow. Faith contrasts with sight, based on supposed infallible proof that someone is regenerate.

As a paedobaptist myself, I believe that we can claim God's promise made to Abraham. "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Gen 17:2). God will be the God of my children. But not everyone accepts this use of the Abrahamic promise. They may perhaps be helped to accept
it if they actually begin to see the effects of the promise operating in the life of the church. God does care for our children and bring them to trust in Christ when we are faithful to our covenantal obligations.⁴

II. The significance of the Gospel narratives

To make further steps in appreciating the significance of Christian community, it is helpful for us to receive the illumination of the four Gospels. The Gospels describe particular incidents from Jesus' earthly life. The incidents happened only once, but they are recorded because they show something about who Jesus is and what he does now as well as what he did then. He is the same Lord (Heb 13:8).

For example, during his earthly life Jesus ate and drank with notorious “sinners” and tax collectors. He pronounced the forgiveness of sins. The recorded incidents of this type, together with the whole tenor of the life of Jesus, are meant to speak to those who feel the weight and guilt of their sins now. We can present the matter quite concretely. Imagine that Jesus were present on earth now, as he was in the first century. Imagine that he came through your town or neighborhood. What would you do? Would you be willing to go to him and eat with him? Would you want to ask for his forgiveness? And what would he do in return? The entire Gospel record makes it clear that Jesus would receive you, no matter how grievous were your sins, if you came to him in repentance.

But the sinner’s reaction might well be, “Unfortunately he is not physically present on earth now. How can I hear his voice, and be received by him, and be sure that I am forgiven? He is no longer here.” Or is he? The ascension of Jesus to the right hand of God, and his pouring out of the Spirit, represent an advance rather than a withdrawal of his grace. He is “with you always, to the close of the age” (Matt 28:20). Of course, Christ is God, and as such has always been present everywhere. But as Messiah and human mediator of salvation, he came at first only to Palestine. Now,

⁴ Even these reflections about infants are perhaps not the whole story. I suspect that our Western individualism affects us. It seems natural to ask whether individuals have faith. But when we are affected by individualism it no longer makes sense to ask whether groups can have faith—a family, for example, or the church as a whole. Yet I do not think that the Bible teaches a bare individualism. We are not merely individual souls. By God’s design, we are people who from the beginning are related to other people. And our knowledge is not merely ours individually, but to a larger extent than we realize the knowledge of those who are closest to us. See, e.g., Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 129-83.

Hence it is not inappropriate to think of the Christian faith as a shared family faith. Family baptism might be an appropriate response to the family’s faith, as expressed through its adults. I believe that this community aspect of faith is important. But it has never been convincing to baptists, so I will not pursue it further.
through his Messianic reign and the gift of the Holy Spirit, he can be present everywhere, rather than merely in Capernaum or Cana or Jerusalem. His words of promise can be heard by people all over the world rather than merely by those within earshot of his physical body.

Thus, every repentant sinner, and not merely one sinful woman, is meant to hear Jesus’ words, “Your sins are forgiven,” and “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:48,50). In an extended sense, through the continued ministry of the Holy Spirit who applies the words to our hearts, Jesus speaks these words to us today. We may meet Jesus today, and fellowship with him in his heavenly home, just as really and effectively as when he was physically on earth. Indeed, the present condition exceeds the earlier one, as Jesus points out. He says, “it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7).

Our situation is fundamentally different from that of the original disciples, because Jesus has died, has risen, and has gone to the Father. Yet in another sense it is fundamentally the same, because we can participate in the same reality of fellowship with him. We can come to him to be freed from the devil, as the demoniacs were healed. We can come to him for physical healing and for the spiritual healing that it symbolizes (Luke 5:20). Sometimes, indeed, physical healing is now delayed (2 Tim 4:20; Phil 2:27). But the physical healings that Christ worked during his earthly life betoken the healing of the body through the resurrection, and all who come to Christ will receive this healing (1 Cor 15:47-57; Phil 3:21; John 6:54, 58). Through the Lord’s Supper we come and eat with him, in a manner that exceeds the experience of the tax collectors and sinners who sat with him at a common table.

The experience of the Christian community together is the experience of being disciples. Like the twelve disciples, we are subject to Jesus’ commands, we are commissioned to go out, we enjoy his fellowship, his welcome, his instruction, and his rebukes. We gather in the presence of Jesus in his heavenly city (Heb 12:22-29), a city greater and more august than earthly Palestinian Jerusalem.

How do our children fit into this picture? Again, we may most effectively ask, “What would you do if Jesus passed through your town or neighborhood?” Would you want to take your children to Jesus as well as to go yourself? If you are a Christian, the answer is that of course you would. Would you like to bring your children to Jesus so that he could pray for them and bless them? Matt 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; and Luke 18:15-17 provide obvious encouragement. Christian instincts would provide the same answers even if we did not possess these specific passages. And then the same train of reasoning applies. On first thought, one might claim that nowadays “unfortunately Jesus is not here.” On second thought, he is indeed here, through his continual reign and through the presence of his Spirit. He is here in the Christian community (Matt 18:20).

When Christians receive from the Lord a newborn child, what do they sense that they must do? The child is a truly awesome gift from God. At the
same time, the child is an awesome responsibility for the parents. The first 
impulse can only be to present the child to God, and to ask for his blessing. 
We ask that his grace and saving power be exerted on the entire family. 
Moreover, the parents are encouraged by Mark 10:13-16, or perhaps 
merely by their general sense that Jesus loves them and is at hand in every 
aspect of their lives. They bring the child to the church, the assembly of 
Christians, because here Jesus manifests himself most intensively, and here 
they can receive the ministry of Jesus not only directly but through other 
Christians who are channels for Christ's love.

Many baptist churches have dedication ceremonies for infants. In the 
presence of the assembly the parents dedicate or consecrate the child to 
God. Is Jesus present there to meet them? Of course he is. "You have come 
to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You 
have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the 
church of the first-born, whose names are written in heaven. You have come 
to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, 
to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant" (Heb 12:22-24).

We sometimes underestimate the significance of how Jesus received the 
only welcomed children, but prayed for them (Matt 19:13). He blessed 
them (Mark 10:16). Such a blessing was not merely a vain wish that good 
things would happen. It was a pronouncement from the Messiah, the final 
mediator of God's goodness, that goodness will come to them. Aaron, the 
high priest, was instructed to bless the Israelites by saying, "The LORD 
bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be 
gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace" 
(Num 6:24-25). Now Jesus turns to bless the children—and Jesus is the 
Melchizedekian priest, the high priest forever who supersedes the priest-
hood of Aaron and his descendants. He blesses them, we may suppose, by 
asking for the light of God's face and for peace, and by giving them the 
favor of his presence and fellowship.

When we translate this picture into the present time, it becomes if any-
thing even more profound. Parents bring their children to Jesus in Chris-
tian worship. And what does Jesus do? Jesus receives them! He embraces 
them (Mark 10:16). He is the divine mediator, with all authority in heaven 
and on earth, who opens the way into the Most Holy Place, the throne-
room of God. In priestly prayer, as the final intercessor before God, he blesses 
them with the blessings of God. And he says this word to us, "Let the little

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5 I am indebted to Dr. Edmund P. Clowney for many of these insights.
6 The blessings are real, just as Aaron's were. But the blessings of God's goodness that 
Israel enjoyed were turned into curses when Israel disobeyed and despised God's offer 
(Deut 28; Amos 3:2). Likewise, participation in baptism and in the fellowship of the Christian 
community are properly blessings, but make us liable to intense judgment if we despise them 
(Heb 10:26-31). Properly used, baptism and Christian fellowship are channels promoting our 
good, our salvation. But apostates will bear God's judgment. To them, the waters of baptism 
no longer presage cleansing but engulfing destruction. On the judgmental aspects of baptism, 
see Meredith G. Kline, By Oath Consigned, 50-83; Allen Mawhinney, "Baptism, Servanthood, 
children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Luke 18:16). Here is the authoritative invitation to bring our children to him, the divine encouragement. And infant children are included (βρέφη in Luke 18:15).  

Charles H. Spurgeon, “Children Brought to Christ, Not to the Font, A Sermon Delivered on Sunday Morning, July 24th, 1864,” The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1969) 10:419, argues with some plausibility that these passages have in view toddlers and older children, that is, children who could walk and understand Jesus’ speech. Spurgeon observes that in verse 16 Jesus called the children, “which he would hardly have done if they could not comprehend his call: and he said, ‘Suffer the little children to come,’ which implies that they could come, and doubtless they did come, . . . .” Several points may be made in response to Spurgeon.

First, what is the meaning of βρέφη (NIV “babies”)? The term can appropriately be applied to babies still in the womb (Luke 1:41) and to newborn babies (Luke 2:12,16; Acts 7:19). Presumably the term denotes babies with a range of ages. It is difficult without extensive evidence to determine an upper cut-off point in age. But without further evidence one cannot simply assume that toddlers are included. At the very least, the use of this more specific term instead of the more general word παιδία (“children”) puts focus on the young age of these children, not on their being old enough to walk as Spurgeon emphasizes. Moreover, note the phrase “also . . . babies” (ἐκ ταῦτα βρέφη) in Luke 18:15. “Also, even” (ἐκατέρτων) suggests that the babies are in addition to others. The use of the more general term “child” (παιδίον) at later points in the passage makes it fairly plain that babies came in addition to children who were somewhat older. The parallel passages in Matthew and Mark, which use only the more general term “child” (παιδίον), confirm the point. βρέφη in Luke 18:15 is thus specifically contrasted with the generality of “children,” making it moreproblematic to assume that only toddlers and older children were involved.

Second, what is the meaning of Jesus’ calling the children in verse 16? Spurgeon argues that the children must be able to understand Jesus’ words. But the attending participial clause introduced by λέγον is a construction with an adverbial participle of means or manner (Ernest de Witt Burton, Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek [3d ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898], §443). From this construction, we may infer that Jesus called the children by uttering the words given in the subsequent clause. The quoted speech, “Let the little children . . . .”, thus provides us with the substance of his call. This speech addresses the disciples in the second person, and the children themselves only indirectly in the third person.

Jesus called the children, not by means of a direct address to them that would presuppose their ability to understand, but by means of an address to the disciples, who have it in their power to ensure that the call is adequately respond to. In fact, we may reasonably assume that the children included a mixture of ages, as the “also” of verse 15 hints. Older children who were walking on their own would of course be encouraged by hearing Jesus’ words. Some toddlers might have asked to be carried, even if they were able to walk. They would be encouraged, though they would not have had to do anything. Parents who were carrying infants or toddlers, and parents who were coming along side their older children, would also be encouraged to continue to bring their children toward Jesus. But all these are intended secondary effects of a speech that is directed primarily to the disciples. Hence we cannot confidently deduce that all the children needed to understand in order for the call to be real. Spurgeon presupposes exactly what is not provided in the text, namely that calling the children must mean calling them by directly addressing them.

Third, what is the meaning of the directive that the children “come to me” in verse 16? The older children come by walking, the toddlers come by walking or being carried, while the infants come by being carried. The word “come” (ἐρχόμενος) is in fact a quite general word for physical movement, and does not contain in itself any specific indication concerning the manner of locomotion (cf. Matt 7:25; 13:4; Heb 6:7). Spurgeon has once again assumed something more specific than the text warrants.
But in what sense does Jesus receive the children? The Pharisees grumbled that "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). Jesus welcomed and received inquirers. He did not mean only with people who were confirmed, mature disciples. If Jesus ate with sinners, he did not thereby indicate that they were all his disciples or that it did not matter whether they continued in sin. Hence we must distinguish between two kinds of welcome. Jesus can welcome someone as an inquirer, or else as a disciple.

Baptists have, I think, often understood the passages about children to be speaking about inquirers rather than disciples. Hence the lesson for now is that we should pay attention to children, respect them, and encourage them. But we do not receive them as disciples until they are older.

However, as I pointed out in the previous article, "Indifferentism and Rigorism," small children can be Jesus' disciples, not merely inquirers. In addition, the fact that Jesus blessed the children is significant (Mark 10:16). In almost all cases in the Bible, blessing takes place within the circle of God's people, not outside. God's justice requires that outsiders be destroyed, either in hell or through death and resurrection with Christ, leading to a new life (2 Cor 5:17). We pray that outsiders would be converted, but not that they would be blessed in a way that simply confirms their present course. Hence the fact of blessing also suggests that these children are within the circle of blessings belonging to the kingdom of God, that is, blessings including salvation itself.

III. The heavenly assembly

To proceed beyond this point we need to reflect on the meaning of heavenly worship in the presence of Christ. We need to be overwhelmed by the majesty of God, raptured by the praise contained in the songs of living creatures and of myriads of angels (Rev 4:11-5:14). We need to see Jesus in his glory and in his love and mercy. Together with all the saints, we need

Fourth, it seems natural to assume that the statement in verse 16, "Let the children come to me," is to be taken broadly, and does not exclude infants of any age. Does Spurgeon seriously want to argue that Jesus would not have been willing to embrace and bless children who were under one year old, if their parents had brought them? Thus, it seems unnecessary to establish the exact ages of the children who did in fact come to Jesus. We ought simply to acknowledge the general principle: he welcomes them when they are brought, whatever their age.

In the larger context of his sermon, Spurgeon explicitly recognizes that a passage like this one encourages parents to bring their children to Jesus now, by praying for them and instructing them in the Christian faith (ibid., pp. 416-17). I agree that such actions are included among the secondary implications of the passage. But Spurgeon appears to have left out the corporate dimensions of the Christian worship. The church presents itself and its members to Christ in heavenly assembly every Sunday. Surely this assembly provides the most immediate point of contact with the instances in the Gospels where Jesus meets with disciples or would-be disciples seeking his blessing.

in our assembling together to experience more of "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Eph 3:18), to know "the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe" (Eph 1:18-19).

When, in the assembly, we experience in-depth fellowship with Christ in heaven, the status of our children clarifies itself. How can we fail to bring them to Jesus, in accordance with his words? And do we not believe that he receives them? That he prays for them? That he blesses them? If he thereby makes them participants in the heavenly assembly, and in his mediatorial blessing, he has made them participants in the substance of Christian community. We must receive those whom Jesus receives. If he embraces them, we must also. They must be received as members of our Christian fellowship in no less a sense than all our brothers and sisters.

Baptists already do such things to a degree. They practice "infant dedication." Presbyterians and other infant baptists do these things to a degree. They practice infant baptism. But we are all woefully inconsistent with the deep realities of our Christian life together. The mere fact of going through words of dedication or a baptismal ceremony is not the whole of it. Spiritual realities are being expressed in our actions, and at best we are only half awake to them. Our faith is weak. Because blessings are often given in proportion to or in accordance with our faith, our whole life together is weak. It is as if we were providing ourselves and our children with a few scraps to keep them alive when all the time the king's table is groaning under the weight of luscious food.

In my view, infant dedication among baptists is a kind of baptism without water. They dimly sense the spiritual realities of the heavenly Zion. They know instinctively what response is required of families and of children in particular. Does it matter, then, whether we call it dedication or baptism, and whether we use water or not? Yes, it does matter. But, even the partial and faint character of our understanding, and the faulty character of our religious formalities, does not utterly abolish the goodness of God and his ability to pour out undeserved blessings.

Water is appropriate. Children are born dead in sin, born with sinful natures headed for destruction (Ps 51:5; Eph 2:3). Nothing spiritually unclean can fittingly be brought into God's holy presence. The water in baptism symbolizes cleansing. It is thus a symbol of the heavenly laver or washing basin (cf. Exod 30:17-21). Christ needs to wash us in order to receive us. He provides in heaven, through his blood, "a fountain ... to cleanse them from sin and iniquity" (Zech 13:1). Just as the priests entered the Holy Place only after passing by the washing basin, so we enter the heavenly Holy Place only after passing through Christ's cleansing. Baptism applied to adults or to children signifies this heavenly cleansing.

The mere mechanical performance of a rite does not force God into action. But God promises to bless us and meet us through Christ when we
respond in faith, that is, when we appropriate the divinely ordained significance of the rite, when we see it as an epiphany of heavenly worship.

In this respect, baptism is meant to affect not only the person baptized, but the entire Christian community, to whom Christ addresses the symbolism. In baptism, together with the totality of Christ’s address to us, Christ speaks of and betokens the totality of his heavenly ministry. Thus, when baptism is seen for what it is, as a divinely ordained symbolic communication to us, it is filled with meaning and is a channel for God’s blessing to all the church. We enter into the Most Holy Place with Christ, because Christ presents himself to us and transfigures us through meeting us in baptism as his own divinely ordained action. When we ignore it or pervert it, we despise our Lord’s wisdom and can expect to suffer for it.9

Families saw the significance of Jesus’ blessing when they brought their infants to Jesus long ago. Families do so now even when their small children are passive. The children who were brought for Jesus’ blessing during his earthly life were, as far as we know, circumcised as a mark of their cleansing and separation for an Israelite holy priesthood. So now, when Jesus receives children, it is appropriate to wash them with water in order to mark the cleansing of sin and to signify their entrance into the church, that one universal earthly community that has fellowship with Christ in heaven.

But an objection may once again arise. Does Jesus receive infant children as inquirers or as disciples? That is, are infants people who are outside looking in, with whom he shows friendliness, or people that he joins to his community in response to the parents’ offering? One cannot “prove” an answer to the satisfaction of everyone. By nature the reasoning is analogical. We relate Jesus’ past earthly life by analogy to his present heavenly life. We relate our visible actions as a church to the heavenly actions of forgiveness and salvation. Who can say with dogmatic confidence at exactly what points the analogies hold and at what points they break down?

However, I think that continued participation in heavenly worship has power to straighten out our vision in this area as in other areas. Let us

9 The robust ability to understand baptism as an aspect of our communion with Christ and our heavenly worship is, I believe, a key to its proper use and significance. Historically, high sacramentalist views of baptism have frequently led to the degeneration of baptism into a quasi-magical rite. The displacement of faith by magic, mechanism, or ecclesiastical arrogance then undermines the real potential for baptism to exercise its proper function as a means of spiritual communion and divine blessing.

In reaction to such abuse, low views of baptism arise. Out of understandable abhorrence for perversions, they downgrade the significance of baptism. Historically, this move has frequently led to suppression of the full force of the symbolic dimension involved in spiritual communion with Christ. Baptism is treated as mere sign of something absent, or as a mere convenient occasion for converts to testify to their commitment. Lack of faith and lack of spiritual perception here take the form of insensitivity to the depth embedded in the rite, when it is properly understood in its divinely ordained connections with the totality of Scripture. People then largely miss the force of baptism as an enacted word of Christ. It is a powerful, life-changing communication from Christ concerning his glory and mercy, and concerning the application of his death and resurrection life to us.
pursue a bit farther. Do we think that we can actually bring our children before Jesus in the heavenly assembly? Such a step is much more “dangerous” than bringing children before Jesus on earth. It is more “dangerous” than going up to the top of Mount Sinai, because even Sinai was only a shadow of the full glory of the present heavenly assembly. The heavenly assembly is holy. Only one who is perfect can enter the presence of God without dying. The only way to protect our children is to have them receive cleansing.

Hence it appears that there are only two alternatives. First, we are going to bring them, through the cleansing rite of baptism and the heavenly cleansing worked by the Lord himself. Or else we are not going to bring them at all. But we still go ourselves in order to request prayer for them. The latter situation would be like parents going to Jesus while he was on earth and requesting that Jesus pray for their children (as in Mark 7:24-30).

In addition, consider what we as parents are going to learn to ask Jesus when we come to the heavenly assembly. Do we ask only that Jesus would treat our children as inquirers? Do we ask only that Jesus will give them long life or material prosperity or rich opportunities to hear the gospel? Or do we ask that he will actually save them, and bless them with all the blessing of salvation? What answer does Jesus give to the latter request? What does it mean to have faith here? What does it mean to appreciate that we have access into the heavenly sanctuary, in order to bring even the most stupendous request (Eph 3:19-21)?

I personally think that infant baptism is biblically warranted. But this conclusion should be no cause for complacency or pride on the part of infant baptists. Those of us who believe in infant baptism are inconsistent with regard to the total life implications of heavenly worship. Nor should this conclusion cause impatience towards those whose practice differs. Their sins and problems and deficiencies are to a large extent our sins as well, or in some instances the mirror-image opposite of ours. We need to grow together in our union with Christ, into the full stature of Christ (Eph 4:11-16). The growth of true worship will, through the power of Christ’s presence, transform us into his likeness (2 Cor 3:18). The controversies over baptism are best resolved not merely by cleverness of argument but by worship that brings the overflowing of the Holy Spirit, who will wipe away the dimness of our faith and our understanding.

Let me put matters in another way. The status of children within our communities, as well as the related question of infant baptism, is, I believe, easy to answer when our spiritual vision and our fellowship with Christ are sufficiently deep. The answer has lain smack before our eyes all the time, in the words of Jesus, “Let the little children come to me, . . .” (Luke 18:16). We have failed to appropriate the answer, or even to see it as an answer, not mainly because we lacked coherent, eloquent arguments, but because we lacked spiritual discernment. We need to see this one word in connection with the entire picture of redemption, as it is manifested in our access to Christ in heaven. Christians everywhere will inevitably come
to agreement on this subject, in both theory and practice, as we respond
more thoroughly to the realities of our union with Christ at the heavenly
Mt. Zion. We must therefore avoid mere wrangling about disputed issues,
baptism included, and practice the instructions of Eph 4:11-16 that lead to
corporate as well as individual maturity in Christ (John 17:22-23).

IV. Responding to questions

In order that my remarks may not be misunderstood, it is convenient
for me to tie things together by responding to some common questions
that may arise.

1. Are you saying that we should presume that children of Christian parents are
regenerate? Should children baptized because we presume that they are regenerate?

We no more “presume” that children are regenerate than we presume
that adult church members are regenerate. We leave it to God to evaluate
people’s hearts. We ought to treat both adult church members and their
children as Christians, with all the love and encouragement, the disciple
and rebuke, the hopes and the warnings that we owe to Christians.10 That
is, we treat them like all those who are our spiritual brothers and sisters in
a common fellowship. Naturally, the particular texture of our love takes
into account the uniqueness of each person, including age, sex, gifts, and
previous Christian experience. We know that God may use the ministry of
the church as a context in which he works regeneration in the hearts of
church members who are hypocritical, that is, spiritually dead; he uses it
to sustain and further transform those already regenerated; and he uses it
to warn those within the church who rebel against Christ. Such is true both
with respect to adults and with respect to children of all ages.

2. Does baptism with water accomplish the regeneration of all children who are
baptized?

No. Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit. In principle, it may take
place at the moment of baptism, or before, or after. Since regeneration
is mysterious and is known to human beings only through its effects
(John 3:8), we do not need to know the exact moment when it occurs.
Moreover, as we know from the warnings in Hebrews (3:6; 4:11; 6:1-12;
10:26-39) and elsewhere (e.g., Col 1:23), neither baptism nor any other
memorable past experience provides some magical guarantee or talisman,
immunizing us against backsliding. We cannot avoid the necessity of
watchfulness and diligence in continuing to receive the grace of Christ as

10 For a similar emphasis, see Charles Hodge, “A Practical View of Infant Baptism,”
BRPR 33 (1861) 692-94.
obedient disciples. Such watchfulness and obedience on our part, including
the exhortations of other Christians, is one of the means that Christ the
great shepherd uses to keep us safe until the end (John 10:27-29).

As many theologians have said, baptism is “a means of grace.” Like
prayer and Bible study, it is one of the means that God uses to bless us and
others. Like prayer, its effectiveness is related to the faith of the partici-
pating community. To turn it into a mechanical, magical performance is
just as bad as turning prayer into a rote, thoughtless repetition of words
(Matt 6:5-15). In both prayer and baptism, we must keep in the center the
vital matter of our continuing fellowship with Christ. He is the hearer and
presenter of prayer (Heb 7:25), and he is the real priest and celebrant who
washes and cleanses our sins. Through the power and presence of the Holy
Spirit he works in and through our prayers (Rom 8:26). He also works apart
from our prayers, and sometimes has to overcome our unbelief! The same
is true of the church’s acts of baptism. He works in and through baptism
to cleanse us from sin. He may also work apart from baptism, through other
means, or apart from any means.

A mystery and incalculability remains in these actions, because he is the
majesty Lord of the universe, and we are not. We cannot second-guess what
he is doing, and when he will do it. But when we believe his promises, we
can have confidence in him, because in his promises he commits himself. For
example, prayer is efficacious when it is based on God’s will, which is
articulated in his promises (Matt 21:22). Baptism is a kind of promise in
action, in which Christ extends to us all the blessings of union with him
(Gal 3:27). The promise is received by faith—the family’s faith, and also,
as the child grows, the child’s. Both for an adult and for a child who is
baptized, subsequent apostasy will make the person liable to curse for having
abused the gift (Heb 10:29-30).

3. Should we baptize children of non-Christian parents?

No. We as a church can present to Jesus in heaven only what is ours, that
is, only what has been entrusted to us and over which we have some kind
of authority. Non-Christian parents have God-given authority over their
children. As long as they themselves are rebelling against God, they cannot
approach the heavenly temple, nor can they meaningfully bring their chil-
dren to Jesus for blessing.

Among other things, baptism is entrance into and commitment to the
fatherly discipline and instruction of God. We enter into a life of disciple-
ship. Free adults become disciples through their own active commitment,
in which they submit themselves to the presence of Christ in the Christian
community. Young children are discipled through their Christian parents.
The parents bring God’s fatherly care to bear on the children. By contrast,
children of non-Christian parents can be received for baptism only when
they are able to make a commitment of this kind for themselves, apart from
parental action.
By similar reasoning, adopted children of Christian parents ought to be baptized. In some cultures, members of an extended family under the authority of a patriarch might all be baptized, as in Gen 17:23-27. This type of circumstance is obviously a difficult one for us in the Western world. But I believe that it is difficult mostly because we are not indigenous to a culture of this type. If we were a part of the culture, our own intuitions would be different. We would sense more readily the appropriateness of such an entrance of a corporate household into fellowship with God.

4. Why don't you appeal to the example of circumcision and the covenant that God made with Abraham and his offspring?

I believe that there is a genuine analogy between Abraham’s situation and ours, and between circumcision and baptism. Reformed theological literature on infant baptism usually appeals to this analogy. But baptist brothers and sisters often have difficulty at this point. They are aware, as all of us should be, of the vast changes that have come to the people of God when Christ came into the world, was crucified, and was raised. In view of such changes, it is more difficult for people to be sure of themselves when they look at the analogy between circumcision and baptism.

It may be helpful, then, to develop our reflections about children with the New Testament as our immediate starting point. Once it becomes clear to us that children of Christian parents are an integral part of our Christian community, we can then go back to a passage like Acts 2:39. Peter and his Jewish hearers were familiar with the practice in the Old Testament whereby children were an integral part of the people of God. The same is to be true in the New Testament church. Hence we can have confidence that this passage in Acts does indeed have in view the extension of God’s Fatherly discipline to whole families. Hence there is also a legitimate connection between Abraham’s practice and ours.

5. Are not children in a different category spiritually until they reach the age of accountability?

No. The idea of an “age of accountability” is not really in conformity with the Bible. The Holy Spirit can be at work in children even from the womb (Luke 1:15,44). Very early in life, children manifest sin and righteousness by obedience or disobedience to their parents (Exod 20:12). Very early they can begin to understand the issues of salvation as we tell simple stories about Jesus, about the creation and about the fall.

Naturally, their understanding needs to grow. Their mastery of language and their knowledge of the world around them are weak and partial. Hence many times it may difficult for us (but not for God) accurately to judge their motives or their spiritual state. They may do damage by accident, by childish lack of understanding of their environment, or by childish misunderstanding of our words. For such things they must not be held "accountable" in the same way as adults. Yet at the most basic level they are accountable to God for all their motives and their actions.

Scripture says, "Everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded" (Luke 12:48). Comparatively speaking, children have been entrusted with only a little. But that little requires a response. The smaller circle of their responsibility is not the same as having no responsibility at all. Thus, there is no fixed date when accountability begins. We ought not to shunt smaller children over into a backwater, merely waiting indifferently until they grow old enough to be like us. We are accountable to treat our children as people with limited capacities and limited development, but still as coheirs of the promises of salvation.

6. Aren't you overlooking some important distinctions that would invalidate your argument?

Doubtless distinctions might be introduced at several crucial points, in order to avoid the conclusions of my reflections. Infants who cannot yet talk or otherwise respond in mature, unambiguous ways are different from those who can. Children are different from adults. Articulate public profession of faith is different from inarticulate faith. Infant dedication, as it occurs in many baptist churches, may be viewed as an adaptation of the church's general ministry of prayer, and as such is different from the rite of baptism, whose significance must be fixed by the New Testament. Baptism with water is distinguishable from the union with Christ that it signifies. Christ's actions on earth are distinguishable from his present actions in heaven. And so on. I hope that I would be open to being further enlightened on these and other matters pertaining to my reflections.

However, those who invoke such distinctions might easily miss the point. I am not offering an argument in quite the conventional way. I doubt whether we will get very far if we make these matters primarily items for extended intellectual debate, dissection, and the play of logical analysis.

We need to live them out. We need to discover for ourselves in Christian assemblies the realities of heavenly worship. We need to struggle in ourselves and among other Christians with raising our children and treating them with the full range of Christian love and respect. We need to start baptizing professing children at a very young age if they have not already been baptized. We need to appreciate, not just debate, the Lord's meeting with us through baptism and the Lord's Supper.
As we do these things, I trust that our spiritual vision will become clearer. Then, and not earlier, we may find that our fine-grained distinctions were or were not terribly relevant to worshipping the Father in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23).

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