

Theology Matters

A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry

Vol 13 No 4 • Sep/Oct 2007

John Calvin On The Sacraments: A Summary

By Viola Larson

Within a large sanctuary in an old brick Midwestern Methodist Church, at the age of twelve or thirteen, I was baptized. I joined the church because others my age were joining, and having just seen the movie “The Robe,” I clung to some rather romantic ideas about Christianity. Without faith I hadn’t a clue what being a Christian meant. Three years later, in a tiny store front Southern Baptist Church in California I was claimed by Christ and was baptized again.

My history hardly seems a likely beginning for someone writing a summary of John Calvin’s views of the sacraments. But this has been a deeply moving time of sifting through ideas, examining Scriptural truths and finding wonderful teaching within the pages of Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.¹ I hope the reader will also experience and grasp the goodness of the Father’s gifts to his children found in this study of Calvin on the Sacraments of the Church.

The Definition and Meaning of a Sacrament

“Book Four: Chapter XIV: The Sacraments”

Calvin begins with God’s promise and our own weak faith along side our devotion and witness before the powers of heaven and earth. His definition of a sacrament is, “an external sign, by which the Lord seals

on our consciences his promises of good-will toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety towards him, both before himself, and before angels as well as men.”⁽¹⁾² Calvin refers to the ancient writers who translate the Greek word “mystery” as *sacramentum*; he also refers to the Biblical texts: Eph 1:9; 3:2; Col 1:26; 1 Tim 3:16. (2)

No sacrament is given without God’s promise. It is the function of the sacrament to seal and confirm the promise. Although God’s Word is itself sufficient and the sacrament is not needed to establish God’s Word, because our faith is weak we are given the sacrament to affirm God’s Word to us. The sacrament is given in material form because we are human and reside in bodies; we need earthly reminders of God’s spiritual promises. Calvin offers a quote from Chrysostom about the need to have “spiritual things under things visible.”

Table of Contents

John Calvin on the Sacraments.....	p. 1
Baptism and the <i>Munus Triplex</i>	p. 13

But Chrysostom is quick to add that the spiritual thing is not “inherent in the nature of the [material] things.” In other words, the gift resides in God and has to do with our relationship to him; the sacraments, both baptism and the Lord’s Supper, are empty signs which God’s gift of salvation and life make full. (3)

Significant for today’s Church is Calvin’s insistence that the preaching of the Word be tied directly to the sacrament. Using Augustine’s statement, “Let the Word be added to the element, and it will become a sacrament,” and including his reference to Rom 10:8 with 1 Peter 3:21, Calvin emphasizes the importance of the Word as a clarification of the sacrament. He writes:

... it is known that, from the very beginning of the world, whenever God offered any sign to the holy Patriarchs, it was inseparably attached to doctrine, without which our senses would gaze bewildered on an unmeaning object. Therefore, when we hear mention made of the sacramental word, let us understand the promise which, promised aloud by the minister, leads the people by the hand to that to which the sign tends and directs us. (4)

Calvin refers to Paul’s use of “*circumcision as a seal (Rom. iv. 11).*” The believer looks at the sacrament and by analogy moves to the mysteries “hidden in the sacraments.”(5) Calvin offers various analogies of the relationship of the promises to the sacraments. One of the clearest and strongest is the use of foundations and pillars, the foundation being the Word of God and the pillar being the sacrament. Calvin writes, “For just as a building stands and leans on its foundation, and yet is rendered more stable when supported by pillars, so faith leans on the Word of God as its proper foundation, and yet when the sacraments are added leans more firmly, as if resting on pillars.” (6)

Writing of the imperfection of our faith, Calvin links the sacraments to the grace of Christ and the effectiveness of the sacraments toward those who receive them with faith in his grace. That others spurn God’s grace does not make his grace ineffective. Calvin writes, “... the Lord offers us his mercy, and a pledge of his grace, both in his sacred Word and in the sacraments; but it is not apprehended save by those who receive the Word and sacraments with firm faith: in like manner as Christ, though offered and held forth for salvation to all, is not, however, acknowledged and received by all.” The sacraments are “evidence of divine grace” and “seals of the goodwill” God intends for us. They, therefore, “sustain, nourish, confirm, and increase our faith.” (7)

The Holy Spirit and the Sacraments

Turning to the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives, Calvin explains how it is that we are willing to receive both Word and sacrament, be taught by them, and are transformed by them. We are taught the Word, confirmed by the sacraments and in all of this enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Thus our transformation, including our spiritual walk, is through the Holy Spirit whose guidance and authority are always connected to the Word and graciously associated with the sacrament. (8)

Likewise, the ability of the sacraments to increase our faith does not reside in them but in the power of the Holy Spirit. Without the actions of the Spirit on our hearts the sacraments are empty of effectiveness. “The sacraments duly perform their office only when accompanied by the Spirit, the internal Master, whose energy alone penetrates the heart, stirs up the affections, and procures access for the sacraments into our souls.” Additionally, Calvin makes use of the parable of the sower to explain how even in the preaching of the Word it is the Holy Spirit who works in the heart to prepare the person to receive the Word. Thus the Word attached to the sacrament is made effectual by the power of the Holy Spirit. (9-11)

As believers, our confidence is not in the sacrament itself but in God. To clarify, Calvin explains that although God gives mercies to us with such gifts as fire for warmth and animals for food, such material objects are not themselves the mercies of God. In the same way the sacraments are not themselves the mercies or glory of God but point to his glory and mercy. God could take away the sacraments from us but his glory and mercies would remain. The point is, the Christian’s faith above all else is in God not in external signs. (12)

Receiving Communion Without Faith

Interestingly, Calvin’s arguments against the Roman Catholic mass are helpful for those who today must protest the attempt by others to baptize atheists or offer communion to unbelievers. Denouncing the idea that it is the sacrament that justifies and confers grace, Calvin writes:

For what is a sacrament received without faith, but most certain destruction to the Church? For, seeing that nothing is to be expected beyond the promise, and the promise no less denounces wrath to the unbeliever than offers grace to the believer, it is an error to suppose that anything more is conferred by the sacraments than is offered by the Word of God, and obtained by true faith. (14)

Calvin makes a distinction between what he calls the virtue of the sacrament and the sacrament itself, suggesting that it is the virtue which is the actual help.

He defines the virtue as grace. Expanding on the idea of grace as the virtue of the sacrament, Calvin explains that it brings harm to those who come without faith. He quotes Augustine: “Why is it that many partake of the altar and die, and die by partaking? For even the cup of the Lord was poison to Judas, not because he received what was evil, but being wicked he wickedly received what was good (August. In Joann. Hom. 26).” (15)

Jesus Christ, the Foundation of the Sacraments

One of the clearest and best of Calvin’s statements concerning the distinction between the grace of the sacraments and the material sacrament itself is his focus on Christ as foundation. He writes:

I say that Christ is the matter, or, if you rather choose it, the substance of all the sacraments, since in him they have their whole solidity, and out of him promise nothing.... Bidding adieu to all other causes of righteousness which the wit of man devises, our duty is to hold by this only. In so far, therefore, as we are assisted by their instrumentality in cherishing, confirming, and increasing the true knowledge of Christ, so as both to possess him more fully, and enjoy him in all his richness, so far are they effectual in regard to us. (16)

Turning to the Old Testament, Calvin writes of the various kinds of signs God has used as memorials or sacraments, for instance the rainbow and the tree of life. “These were to Adam and Noah as sacraments: not that the tree could give Adam and Eve the immortality which it could not give to itself; or the bow (which is only a reflection of the solar rays on the opposite clouds) could have the effect of confining the waters; but they had a graven mark on them by the Word of God, to be proofs and seals of his covenant.” Importantly, he also points out how others have used signs which are not sacraments. That is, since the material objects are not pointers to God’s promise, found in his Word, they are not sacraments. (18, 19)

Returning to Jesus Christ, Calvin shows how both the sacraments of the Old and new Testaments have their foundation in him:

But as we have already shown that sacraments are a kind of seals of the promises of God, so let us hold it as a most certain-truth, that no divine promise has ever been offered to man except in Christ, and hence when they remind us of any divine promise, they must of necessity exhibit Christ.... There is only this difference, that while the former shadowed forth a promised Christ while he was still expected, the latter bear testimony to him already come and manifested. (20)

Looking at the sacraments of the Old Testament, circumcision, washings and purifications as well as sacrifices, Calvin shows how Jesus Christ is the basis of all sacraments. He uses Phil 2:8 and Rom 5:19. Jesus is the foreshadowed sacrifice, the only truly obedient One, the faithful High Priest. (21)

Turning to the New Testament, Calvin begins to make a distinction between baptism and the Lord’s Supper. He writes, “For baptism testifies that we are washed and purified; the Supper of the Eucharist that we are redeemed. Ablution is figured by water, satisfaction by blood. Both are found in Christ, who, as John says, ‘came by water and blood.’” Speaking of the blood of Christ, Calvin points to Augustine’s beautiful comment about the blood which flowed from Jesus’ side at his death, that is, “the fountain of our sacraments (August. Hom. In Joann. 26).” (22)

Calvin makes a further comment on the effectiveness of Christ as shown by both the Old and New Testament sacraments. His references to the Old Testament sacraments are one of the ways Calvin shows that grace is in Christ not in the sacraments. “Whatever, therefore, is now exhibited to us in the sacraments, the Jews formerly received in theirs—viz. Christ, with his spiritual riches. The same efficacy which ours possess they experienced in theirs—viz. that they were seals of the divine favour toward them in regard to the hope of eternal salvation.” (23) See also (24)

Additionally, Calvin dwells on the efficiency of Old Testament sacraments commenting on some passages in the book of Hebrews and what is meant by the term “shadows.” He writes, “For until Christ was manifested in the flesh, all signs shadowed him as absent, however he might inwardly exert the presence of his power, and consequently of his person on believers.” That is, the Hebrew sacraments looked forward to the Incarnation; they were empty of all but the goodness of God in the promise of Christ’s coming. (25)

Continuing the distinction between the sacraments of the two Testaments, Calvin writes, “Both testify that the paternal kindness of God, and the graces of the Spirit, are offered us in Christ, but ours more clearly and splendidly. In both there is an exhibition of Christ, but in ours it is more full and complete, in accordance with the distinction between the Old and New Testaments....” (26) So the New Testament people of God are one with the Hebrew saints possessing the same foundation pictured in all Biblical sacraments, that is, Jesus Christ the true sacrificial lamb.

Baptism

“Book Four: Chapter XV: Baptism:”

Baptism, according to Calvin is an “initiatory sign by which we are admitted to the fellowship of the Church...” He writes that baptism contributes to the individual’s faith: first a seal of assurance; second a means of showing us our death in Christ and our new life. Third, baptism assures us of our union with Jesus Christ and consequently how all the blessings of Jesus Christ’s are owned by the Christian.

Of the first contribution, Calvin writes that baptism is “a kind of sealed instrument by which he assures us that all our sins are so deleted, covered, and effaced, that they will never come into his sight, never be mentioned, never imputed.” (1)

Following from this is an explanation about why baptism is not seen in Scripture as a means of the remission of our sins. Calvin, looking at some contested texts refers to Mark 16:16; Eph 5:25, 26; Titus 3:5 and 1 Peter 3:21. He emphasizes 1 Peter where Peter states, “Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”³ Calvin writes that Peter “did not mean to intimate that our ablution and salvation are perfected by water, or that water possesses in itself the virtue of purifying, regenerating, and renewing; nor does he mean that it is the cause of salvation, but only that the knowledge and certainty of such gifts are perceived in this sacrament.”

Calvin further shows how the Word of God proclaims this purification while baptism seals the announcement. “Nay, the only purification which baptism promises is by means of the blood of Christ, who is figured by water from the resemblance to cleansing and washing. Who, then, can say that we are cleansed by that water which certainly attests that the blood of Christ is our true and only laver?” Certainly, here, his emphasis is on the blood of Christ as a means of our salvation. (2)

Next, picking up the theme of forgiveness, Calvin makes clear that the seal of baptism should be remembered when we are despondent over our present sins since not just the sins forgiven at the time of our baptism are covered, but by the blood of Christ, all our sin for all time. (3)

Repeating the theme of forgiveness and expanding on it, Calvin explains that the forgiveness of sins is centered in the church as the Word is preached. He states that the nature of such preaching is, “that we are washed from our sins by the blood of Christ. And what is the sign and evidence of that washing if it be not baptism?” Therefore, the sign cannot be divorced from the preaching of the shed blood of Christ. Calvin

writing that the believer “may thereby assure themselves of that sole and perpetual ablution which we have in the blood of Christ,” once again states that the sinner who is distressed by his sins should remember his baptism. (4)

Calvin writes, “Another benefit of baptism is that it shows us our mortification [death] in Christ and new life in him.” Here Calvin returns to the three things that contribute to our faith. Hence, secondly, in our baptism, we die with Jesus Christ and from our union with him in his death we “feel the efficacy of Christ’s death in the mortification of” our flesh, and “the efficacy of his resurrection in the quickening of the Spirit.” The practical outworking of this is death to our old way of living and new life by the power of the Holy Spirit. (5)

The third benefit of baptism, according to Calvin, is to assure us that we are united to Jesus Christ and therefore share in all of his blessings. He points out that Jesus has “sanctified baptism in his own body, that he might have it in common with us as the firmest bond of union and fellowship which he deigned to form with us...” Here Calvin, writing of the Father as the giver of the Son who is the Mediator and of the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies us, causing us through Christ to receive a new nature, gives a Trinitarian view of baptism. “Wherefore we obtain, and in a manner distinctly perceive, in the Father the cause, in the Son the matter, and in the Spirit the effect of our purification and regeneration.”(6)

Using the Old Testament stories as analogy, Calvin writes of the two graces, ‘ablution,’ that is, the cleansing of sin, and ‘mortification,’ the death of our old self. In the death of Pharaoh and the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, Calvin sees our own death in our union with Christ in his death. Yet, our enemy, the flesh, although defeated still attempts to frighten us. The cloud that covered the Israelites during the day is now a metaphor of the protection of the blood of Christ which covers us from the Father’s wrath which we perceive in our baptism. (9)

Depravity and Righteousness

In this important section on baptism, Calvin deals with the reality of human sinfulness as well as what he calls “original righteousness” and “the grace of baptism.” He defines original sin as the, “depravity and corruption of our nature.” Because of our sinful nature, God’s wrath rests on humanity. Calvin explains that because of our natures our works are “*the works of the flesh* (Gal. v. 19).” (Italics Calvin’s)

In baptism believers are assured that God no longer holds them guilty and they are no longer under the wrath of God. “They also apprehend righteousness, but such righteousness as the people of God can obtain in this life—viz. by imputation only, God, in his mercy,

regarding them as righteous and innocent.” So original righteousness is by imputation, that is, we possess the righteousness that belongs to Christ. It must be emphasized; before God, the righteousness of Christ is our only righteousness. (10)

Calvin reminds the believer that our sinful nature is never truly gone until our physical death. But we are to continue to strive toward perfection and our baptism is a picture of God’s promise to us that the work has begun and there will come a time when our battle with sin will be finished. (11)

Referencing Romans, chapters 6-7, Calvin shows how Paul refers to himself as someone who has been justified, yet still struggles with sin. Paul writes, “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” Paul goes on to write that there is “now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Calvin explains:

Hence he teaches that those whom the Lord has once admitted into favour, and ingrafted into communion with Christ, and received into the fellowship with the Church by baptism, are freed from guilt and condemnation while they persevere in the faith of Christ though they be beset by sin and thus bear sin about with them. (12)

Confessing Christ By Our Baptism

Our baptism is a witness before humanity and is meant to bring glory to Jesus Christ. Calvin writes:

Baptism serves as our confession before men, inasmuch as it is a mark by which we openly declare that we wish to be ranked among the people of God, by which we testify that we concur with all Christians in the worship of one God, and in one religion; by which, in short, we publicly assert our faith, so that not only do our hearts breathe, but our tongues also, and all the members of our body, in every way they can, proclaim the praise of God.

Tying their confession to faithfulness and fidelity to Jesus Christ, and referring to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, Calvin insists that the believer will no longer confess any name but the name of Jesus Christ. Every grace pictured and given in baptism is given by and in Christ. The element of water and its function of cleansing is a true picture of Jesus Christ. (13-14)

Calvin repeats his teaching that baptism symbolizes the reality of the washing away of sin by Jesus Christ. Baptism is only effectual if it is received by the faith already at work in the believer. If it is not received by faith the person receiving baptism, instead, by their faithless act, shows their ingratitude for what Jesus Christ has done. (15)

Calvin proceeds to emphasize how baptism, although performed by those who are evil, when done in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is God’s seal of promise and does not belong to the institution nor the person performing the sacrament. It is God’s because, “by baptism we were initiated not into the name of any man, but into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and, therefore, that baptism is not of man, but of God, by whomsoever it may have been administered.” Calvin lists all the blessings given as images in baptism: “promise of forgiveness of sin, mortification of the flesh, quickening of the Spirit, and communion with Christ.” (16)

The Validity of Infant Baptism When Conversion Takes Place in Adulthood

Addressing a personal difficulty, Calvin acknowledges a lack of conversion when he and others were baptized as infants in the Roman Catholic Church. He understands those baptisms to be valid when the participants repented and acknowledged the promises of God given in baptism. He writes:

We acknowledge, therefore, that at that time baptism profited us nothing, since in us the offered promise, without which baptism is nothing, lay neglected. Now, when by the grace of God we begin to repent, we accuse our blindness and hardness of heart in having been so long ungrateful for his great goodness. But we do not believe that the promise itself has vanished, we rather reflect thus: God in baptism promises the remission of sins, and will undoubtedly perform what he has promised to all believers. (17)

Practical Instructions About Baptism

With references to elaborate ceremonies in the Roman Church, Calvin calls for simplicity in the sacrament. At the same time, he expresses the belief that the mode of baptism does not matter:

How much better, therefore, is it to lay aside all theatrical pomp, which dazzles the eyes of the simple, and dulls the minds, and when any one is to be baptized to bring him forward and present him to God, the whole church looking on as witnesses, and praying over him; to recite the Confession of Faith, in which the catechumen has been instructed, explain the promises which are given in baptism, then baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and conclude with prayer and thanksgiving. (19)

He refuses baptism by the laity even in emergencies since baptism is not a means of salvation. His refusal is also grounded in the understanding that the child in the

womb of the believer belongs to God! Calvin makes use of Tertullian's words to reinforce his own views of not permitting private baptism by laity and women in particular. (21) He goes on to deal with Zipporah circumcising her sons and explains that it was not a particularly righteous act on her part.

Although Calvin is trying to make a point that under no circumstances should a woman baptize, nonetheless, his main point is that babies do not need to be baptized for the sake of salvation. The Christian may with certainty trust in God's grace to save their children who die, are stillborn or miscarried before being baptized. Another very important point, particularly for the contemporary Presbyterian Church, is that the sacraments belong in the Church and are to be administered by the ordained ministry of the Church. (22)

Infant Baptism

“Chapter XVI: Infant Baptism Best Accords with Christ's Institution and the Nature of the Sign”

In this chapter Calvin argues for paedobaptism or pedobaptism, which is infant baptism. He is confronting various types of Anabaptists and probably some mystical sects of the time. Believing infant baptism rests on the foundation of God's Word, Calvin returns to the ground he has laid for baptism in general. He once again, looks beyond the visible sign to the meaning of baptism:

Scripture shows, *first*, that it points to that cleansing from sin which we obtain by the blood of Christ; and, *secondly*, to the mortification of the flesh, which consists in participation in his death, by which believers are regenerated to newness of life, and thereby to the fellowship of Christ. To these general heads may be referred all that the Scriptures teach concerning baptism, with this addition, that it is also a symbol to testify our religion to men. (1-2) (Calvin's italics)

After his initial reminder of the meaning of the sign of baptism, Calvin begins a comparison of circumcision and baptism. Looking first at the promises given to the Israelites in circumcision, he lists God's sufficiency, blessings and eternal life. Here Calvin refers to a statement of Jesus, “‘God,’ says he, ‘is not the God of the dead, but of the living’ (Matt. xxii. 32).” Next Calvin deals with circumcision as the sign of the remission of sins for the Israelites.

Circumcision as God's Sacrament for the Old Testament People of God

Calvin's thinking goes thus: by God's covenant with Abraham, the Jews received eternal life. Gaining eternal

life, which includes access to God, must also include the forgiveness of sins. Here he refers to Paul's statement that for the Gentiles there was a time when they “were aliens from the covenant of promise, without God, and without hope (Eph. ii. 12)...” The inference is that if for the Gentiles hope includes eternal life and the forgiveness of sins, then that must have been so for the Israelites.

Next, Calvin compares God's commandment to Abraham, that he was “to walk before him in sincerity and innocence of heart” to “mortification or regeneration” for the baptized believer. Calvin explains how circumcision is a sign of the reality of grace and gives the example of Moses referring to the circumcision of the heart. He does not give the Biblical text for this but it is, “Yet on your fathers did the Lord set his affection to love them, and he chose their descendents after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day. So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer” (Deut 10:15-16; see also Deut 30:6).

Calvin's conclusion is, “We have, therefore, a spiritual promise given to the fathers in circumcision, similar to that which is given to us in baptism, since it figured to them both the forgiveness of sins and the mortification of the flesh.” Also, importantly, he understands Christ to be the “foundation” of both baptism and circumcision. (3)

Calvin then lays out the similarities between baptism and circumcision, that is, they both point to “the promise of the paternal favour of God, of forgiveness of sins, and eternal life.” He sees both baptism and circumcision being figurative of regeneration, and he understands the foundation to be the same for both. The difference is of course the rite or ceremony. Therefore, seeing that both baptism and circumcision are signs tied to the Word of promise, Calvin believes that babies cannot be denied baptism. (4-5)

One of Calvin's strongest arguments for infant baptism is that God's covenant would diminish in visibility after the advent of Christ without the sign of infant baptism. His reasoning is thus: the covenant God had with the ancient Jews was confirmed by a visible sign, circumcision, so taking the ceremony of baptism away from the infants of Christians means the covenant in the New Testament would become less visible. (6)

Turning to the Children of Believers

Calvin turns to Jesus' blessing of the children and his words, “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matt 19:14). Calvin asks:

If it is right that children should be brought to Christ, why should they not be admitted to baptism,

the symbol of our communion and fellowship with Christ? If the kingdom of heaven is theirs, why should they be denied the sign by which access, as it were, is opened to the Church, that being admitted into it they may be enrolled among the heirs of the heavenly kingdom?

It should be noted here that he sees these children as infants since the Greek denotes “infants still at their mother’s breasts.” (7)

Calvin looks at Acts 16:15, 32, where the text implies that whole families were baptized. Writing of the blessings given by infant baptism, he explains, “For the divine symbol communicated to the child, as with the impress of a seal, confirms the promise given to the godly parent, and declares that the Lord will be a God not to him only, but to his seed; not merely visiting him with his grace and goodness, but his posterity also to the thousandth generation.” Calvin also writes of the benefit to the child, insisting that the congregation will now take greater care for the child’s wellbeing [we pray] including urging the child to service for God as an adult. (8-9)

Some Important Words About Israel and God’s Covenant With Them

With his focus on baptism, Calvin has harsh words to say to those who see the covenant God made with the Jews as being different than that made with New Testament believers. He writes that some see the covenant between Israel and God as only promising temporal goods. Calvin writes, “If this dogma is received, what remains but that the Jewish nation was overloaded for a time with divine kindness (just as swine are gorged in their sty), that they might at last perish eternally?”

Continuing his theme of eternal and spiritual promises to Israel, Calvin uses Paul’s sense of a relationship between a circumcision of the heart and baptism in Colossians to make his own comparisons of the two in their similarities. Here he emphasizes the promises made to Israel, insisting that the more important promise was that of eternal life. Calvin writes:

It is absolutely certain that the original promises comprehending the covenant of God made with the Israelites under the old dispensation were spiritual, and had reference to eternal life, and were, of course, in like manner spiritually received by the fathers, that they might thence entertain a sure hope of immortality, and aspire to it with their whole soul.

However, Calvin includes the material promises God made to the Jewish nation as an important part of God’s sign of his covenant with them. (10-11)

Explaining how those who disagree with infant baptism often do so on the basis of the difference of the two types of descendent of Abraham, that is, those who are the physical seed of Abraham and those who are his children by faith, Calvin shows how this is a misunderstanding. Since the blessing is promised for both the physical descendants and those who are descendants by faith in the one seed of Abraham, that is Christ, the two signs represent what is spiritual. He strengthens his argument by reference to Rom 4:9-12 and 2:14. (12-13)

The Anabaptists argued that the covenant relationship the Jews had with God was strictly based on the physical offspring of Abraham’s children so that baptism cannot be equated with circumcision. Calvin turns this on its head, using it as a means of emphasizing election. He shows how God’s rejection of Esau and Ishmael was meant as proof that God chooses who he will. God’s choice of and promises to the Jewish people means they are the first-born of his family and that it is a spiritual relationship based on the promises of God. Calvin writes:

For they [the Jews] are, as it were, the first born in the family of God. The honour due, on this account, must therefore be paid them, until they have rejected the offer, and, by their ingratitude, caused it to be transferred to the Gentiles. Nor, however great the contumacy with which they persist in warring against the gospel, are we therefore to despise them. We must consider that in respect of the promise, the blessing of God still resides among them; and, as the apostle testifies, will never entirely depart from them, seeing that ‘the gifts and calling of God are without repentance’ (Rom. xi 29).

One can see in this passage an important connection between respect for the Jewish people and confirmation not only of infant baptism but of God’s right of election. (14)

Calvin looks at God’s pleasure in both embracing the children of Abraham by sealing his gift of mercy to Israel with circumcision, and in his pleasure in embracing the children of Christian believers by sealing such mercy with baptism. With the aid of Scripture, he affirms Jesus Christ as the foundation for all mercy. Calvin writes, “Therefore, let it be without controversy, that God is so good and liberal to his people, that he is pleased, as a mark of his favour, to extend their privileges to the children born to them.” Calvin dwells on the similarities between baptism and circumcision “as seen in the internal office, the promise, the use, and the effect.” (15-16)

God's Wrath Against Sinners and the Regeneration of Infants

Calvin explains the precise meaning of baptism as it relates to infants. His arguments are aimed at those who say that only those who are regenerated in adulthood should be baptized. His opponents insisted that infants were already secure until they reached the age of accountability.

Calvin explains how all are under the wrath of God until regenerated. He first states that infants should be brought to Christ because being only Adam's children, they are under God's wrath. Using 1 Cor 15:22 and Eph 2:3, he shows the difference between being in Adam and being in Christ. Calvin next uses John the Baptist as an example of an infant who was sanctified from his mother's womb to prove that God is capable of regenerating even the unborn.

Jesus is his next example. Calvin writes, "... Christ was sanctified from earliest infancy, that he might sanctify his elect in himself at any age, without distinction." Calvin goes on to insist "that none of the elect is called away from the present life without being previously sanctified and regenerated by the Spirit of God." Within this context, he addresses the argument that it is impossible for infants to be regenerated without hearing the Word of God.

Calvin insists that God has called many "and endued [them] with the true knowledge of himself, by internal means, by the illumination of the Spirit, without the intervention of preaching." However, Calvin clarifies his meaning by explaining that enlightened knowledge is like a seed which is unlike full blown knowledge that comes with hearing the Word of God. He also clarifies what is meant by the working of regeneration in the infant who is baptized. He explains that "... children are baptized for future repentance and faith. Though these are not yet formed in them, yet the seed of both lies hid in them by the secret operation of the Spirit." (17-20)

An Affirmation of the Need of Regeneration By the Adult Who Comes for Baptism

Once again, Calvin goes over his explanation that baptism of infants correlates with circumcision in that the understanding of the reality of the promise need not precede the sign. But in this particular section he insists that the adult "ought to follow the understanding of its meaning...." In other words before an adult is baptized he should be regenerated and understand that in baptism he is giving, "... the answer of a good conscience toward God by the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 3:21b)." (21)

Answering arguments about believer's baptism, Calvin does not concur with those who refuse infant baptism yet he does agree with the need for adult regeneration before they are baptized. Calvin's statement is important for the contemporary Presbyterian Church. That is, that "We strenuously insist that such men, [adults], are not to be baptized unless their conversion and faith are discerned at least in as far as human judgment can ascertain it." The unconverted should not receive baptism. (22-23)

Calvin sees Abraham as an example of one who first has faith and then receives the sign, and his son Isaac as an example of one who receives the sign and then has faith. He reminds the Church that the child of an unbeliever is not to receive baptism but "is deemed an alien to the covenant until he is united to God by faith." Calvin writes:

Those who, in adult age, embrace the faith of Christ, having hitherto been aliens from the covenant, are not to receive the sign of baptism without previous faith and repentance. These alone can give them access to the fellowship of the covenant, whereas children, deriving their origins from Christians, as they are immediately on their birth received by God as heirs of the covenant, are also to be admitted to baptism.

Interestingly, he ends by referring to "the Turk," undoubtedly meaning the Muslim and insisting that if such a one should come for baptism, he must bring a confession that is acceptable to the Church. (24)

Calvin explains the meaning of Jesus' words to Nicodemus, "one must be born again." Here Calvin is refuting those who would see Jesus' reference to water to mean baptism. Disagreeing, he equates being born of water and the Spirit with being baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire. Fire is a descriptive word for the Holy Spirit in the same way that water is a descriptive word for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit "has the same effect on the soul that water has on the body."

Calvin at this point also emphasizes once again that baptism is not meant as a means of salvation and refers to John 5:24, "He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life." In the last part of this chapter, he begins to make a distinction between communion and baptism since one is given to infants and one is withheld until they are able to partake of it. (25-32)

The Lord's Supper

“Chapter XVII: The Sacred Supper of Christ,
and What It Brings to Us”

Calvin begins his exposition on the sacrament of communion by dwelling on the Christian's identity in Christ which is linked to the believer's union with Christ. The believer's relationship to the Father is that of children rather than servants. They are adopted children of the Father through union with Christ. Communion points to the food that Jesus Christ has furnished because of his death, "...he, [the Father], has given another sacrament to his Church by the hand of his only-begotten Son—viz. a spiritual feast, at which Christ testifies that he himself is living bread (John vi. 51), on which our souls feed, for a true and blessed immortality.”

Calvin is adamant; the reason for the gift of communion is that Christians may be assured of the efficacy of the shed blood of Christ. Writing that our union with Christ is “incomprehensible,” he understands that the material means of communion reminds the believer that just as wine and bread feed the body “our souls are fed by Christ.” (1)

Communion is a Sign of Our Union With Christ

Because communion is a sign of the Christian's union with Christ, making them one body with him, Calvin lists the reasons they can experience “delight” in the sacrament. Possessing through Christ all that is his, they have eternal life, security in their position within the kingdom of heaven and forgiveness of sins. Affirming these gifts, Calvin reminds the believer of the great exchange between them and Jesus Christ. He writes:

Having become with us the Son of Man, he has made us with himself sons of God. By his own descent to the earth, he has prepared our ascent to heaven. Having received our mortality, he has bestowed on us his immortality. Having undertaken our weakness, he has made us strong in his strength. Having submitted to our poverty, he has transferred to us his riches. Having taken upon himself the burden of unrighteousness with which we were oppressed, he has clothed us with his righteousness.

Since all of this is pictured in communion, the Christian has cause to rejoice in the gift of communion. (2)

The Great Exchange and the Nourishment of Souls

Calvin points to two significant ways that the sacrament brings assurance to the believer. First it brings assurance that Jesus' body was broken and his blood

was shed for the believer's redemption. Second, his broken body and his shed blood are those gifts which continue to nourish their souls and keep them alive. He puts it this way: the body of Christ, “invigorates and keep[s] alive the soul”; the blood of Christ is meant to, “foster, refresh, strengthen, and exhilarate,” the soul of the believer. (3)

Returning to the great exchange that Jesus made for the sake of his adopted brothers and sisters, Calvin is resolute in his insistence that the grace affirmed by communion sends the Christian to the “cross of Christ, where that promise was performed and fulfilled in all its parts.” The sign is not effective if it is divorced from the crucifixion. Jesus' identity as the bread of life does not come from the supper itself, but is seen in his life, death and resurrection and found in our union with him. (4)

Calvin makes a distinction between simply believing in Christ (knowledge) and being nourished and fed continually by union with Christ (faith). He explains that it is by faith that the body of Christ is eaten. He uses the analogy of looking on bread and eating bread. The looking brings knowledge about the bread but will not bring nourishment to the body, whereas eating the bread will. By faith one obtains Christ and is nourished eternally by his body and blood. (5-6)

At this point, Calvin begins to make a distinction between those groups who, in his day, attempted to fasten their spirituality to a free floating spirit or a sort of cosmic Christ minus his humanity and the Roman Catholics who at that time, in a rather magical way, in their rites, focused on his humanity minus his deity. He deals with both in turn.

Calvin intends to make sure his readers understand that communion with Jesus Christ is not just with the Spirit but that they are also nourished by his actual resurrected humanity, which Christ calls “meat indeed” and “drink indeed.” Very carefully, Calvin explains that this is a mystery that is far above even his own understanding yet he will attempt to explain some of the mystery. The first part of the explanation centers on the Biblical view of Christ as the eternal Word of the Father; he was the Word from the beginning. It is Christ who gives life to all things. But because of sin the one who gives life was very distant and humanity was only capable of experiencing and seeing death. Next Calvin looks at the Word revealed in the Incarnation. He writes:

But ever since that fountain of life began to dwell in our nature, he no longer lies hid at a distance from us but exhibits himself openly for our participation. Nay, the very flesh in which he resides he makes vivifying to us, that by partaking of it we may feed for immortality. “I,” says he, “am that bread of life”; “I am the living bread which came down from heaven;” “And the bread that I will give is my flesh,

which I will give for the life of the world” (John vi. 48, 51). By these words he declares, not only that he is life, inasmuch as he is the eternal Word of God who came down to us from heaven, but, by coming down, gave vigour to the flesh which he assumed, that a communication of life to us might thence emanate.

Calvin calls this a “comfort” for the devout believer because “now they find life in their own flesh.” The life that comes to the believer from Jesus Christ comes from the Godhead through the humanity of Jesus Christ to whom the Christian is joined. To reiterate, the life that God gave to Jesus Christ in the incarnation is now the life of the believer. (7-9)

Next Calvin turns to the Holy Spirit to help clarify that the Lord’s Supper is not an “empty sign” but is filled with reality. That is, the Holy Spirit takes that which is distant, the risen Christ, and “unites” the believer to him. And going again over the whole matter of the Christian’s faith and what that means as it relates to communion Calvin writes:

And, indeed, I see not how any one can expect to have redemption and righteousness in the cross of Christ, and life in his death, without trusting first of all to true communion with Christ himself. Those blessings could not reach us, did not Christ previously make himself ours. I say then, that in the mystery of the Supper, by the symbols of bread and wine, Christ, his body and blood, are truly exhibited to us, that in them he fulfilled all obedience, in order to procure righteousness for us—first that we might become one body with him; and, secondly, that being made partakers of his substance, we might feel the result of this fact in the participation of all his blessings. (10-11)

Next Calvin uses the center pages of his chapter on the Lord’s Supper to point out the error of the Roman Catholics regarding the Lord’s Supper. What is important for those in the Reformed faith in these pages is his insistence on preserving the whole resurrected humanity of Christ Jesus in heaven in his glory.

Calvin is unwavering in his presentation of the believer as being in union with the resurrected Christ. He distinguishes between those believers who through faith are united with Jesus Christ verses those who, without faith, are ignorant of any union. The former partake of the blessings of Christ. The latter attempt to feed on substances that in a sense replace Christ’s true body and blood found in the incarnated and resurrected Lord.

The Consequences of Denying the Resurrected Humanity of Jesus Christ

For contemporary believers, Calvin’s warning of error should extend to those who in their progressive theology adhere to a cosmic Christ divorced from the resurrected humanity of Jesus Christ. Whether this entails the idea of a cosmic Christ who as a divine spirit incarnates each individual thus eliminating the uniqueness of Jesus or Christ seen as a free floating spirit divorced from his humanity the problem is the same. When Christ is made simply spirit, functioning minus his resurrected humanity, all the truths of the incarnation drain away from the Church and the sacraments can be filled with any kind of nonsense. (12-25)

Calvin using the Biblical texts and Augustine, writes:

He is not here, for he sits there, at the right hand of the Father. And yet he is here: for the presence of his majesty is not withdrawn. Otherwise, as regards the presence of his majesty, we have Christ always; while, in regards to his bodily presence, it was rightly said, “Me ye have not always.” In respect of bodily presence, the Church had him for a few days: now she holds him by faith, but sees him not with the eye (August. Tract. In Joann. 50).(26)

Communion, the Resurrected Christ and the Returning Christ

There are several other important Biblical teachings connected to the doctrine of the believer’s union with Christ which are intertwined with the Lord’s Supper. Defending the importance of the resurrected Lord, hidden from view in heaven, Calvin points to the Biblical texts that explain this and also those which explain the second coming of Christ. For instance, he writes of the ascension and its relationship to the resurrected humanity of Jesus Christ. “For this reason the angels remind the disciples that it is vain to keep gazing up into heaven, because Jesus, who was taken up, would come in like manner as they had seen him ascend.”

While Calvin was defending against the notion of an invisible Christ and one unconnected to his humanity as this plays out in communion, his words also address those progressives within and outside of the Church who insist there is no resurrected human. They therefore insist there is no second appearing of Jesus Christ. They also know nothing of our union with Christ in his resurrected humanity and therefore they prop-up an empty communion. (27)

Taking Communion Without Faith in Jesus Christ

Going from paragraph 28 to 33, Calvin continues to argue against an invisible Christ seen as bread and wine. But still some of his words are helpful to the contemporary Reformed milieu. That is, how the taking of the Lord's Supper should be understood as it relates to those who reject the saving work of Jesus Christ and yet still receive communion.

First of all, arguing against the concept of the wine as blood, Calvin speaks of the unrepentant taking communion. He writes, "But the very flesh of Christ in the mystery of the Supper is no less a spiritual matter than eternal salvation. Whence we infer, that all who are devoid of the Spirit of Christ can no more eat the flesh of Christ than drink wine that has no savour." That is, eating the flesh of Christ happens within the context of the believers union with Christ, it does not belong to the unbeliever who is without any relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit through the Son.

Secondly, unbelievers, those who deny the work of Jesus Christ, do not prevent the Lord's Supper from being what it is even when they partake of it. Calvin referring to Augustine writes, "I deny that men carry away more from the sacrament than they collect in the vessel of faith. Thus nothing is detracted from the sacrament, nay, its reality and efficacy remain unimpaired, although the wicked, after externally partaking of it, go away empty." The sacrament is tied to the promises of God, it is offered as a gift to all, but those who take it while rejecting Jesus Christ in his incarnation and resurrected humanity "repel the grace of God, and prevent it from reaching them." It is important to note here that it is not the taking of the sacrament that gives faith if faith is not already in the communicant. (33)

Coming to Communion With Both Confession and Love For One Another

Calvin in paragraph thirty-four simply uses many quotes by Augustine to make his case against the Roman Mass. Next he begins to show why, if God's Word is listened to, those taking the Lord's Supper should worship the Lord in heaven and not the Lord in bread and wine. This leads to several aspects of communion important to the believer. (35-36)

First, Calvin looks at the memorial and confessional aspects. He writes, "When we are ordered to show forth the Lord's death till he comes again, all that is meant is, that we should, with confession of the mouth, proclaim what our faith has recognized in the sacrament—viz. that the death of Christ is our life." Calvin calls this "outward confession." (37)

Next Calvin shows how both the purity and the unity of the Church are woven into the Lord's Supper. As believers partake of Christ, that is, in union with Christ, feeding on Christ, they become one with each other. He writes, "This unity is represented by the bread which is exhibited in the sacrament. As it is composed of many grains, so mingled together, that one cannot be distinguished from another; so ought our minds to be so cordially united, as not to allow any dissension or division." This has its practical application and Calvin lays it out with eloquence:

We shall have profited admirably in the sacrament, if the thought shall have been impressed and engraven on our minds, that none of our brethren is hurt, despised, rejected, injured, or in any way offended, without our, at the same time, hurting, despising, and injuring Christ; that we cannot have dissension with our brethren, without at the same time dissenting from Christ; that we cannot love Christ without loving our brethren; that the same care we take for our own body we ought to take of that of our brethren, who are members of our body; that as no part of our body suffers pain without extending to other parts, so every evil which our brother suffers ought to excite our compassion. (38)

The importance of the Word preached and given alongside communion is emphasized by Calvin. Administering the Lord's Supper without the preaching of the Word makes it simply a kind of magical ritual. (39)

Calvin makes a distinction, once again, between those who take communion because of faith and those who take it while rejecting the blood of Christ. To the former it is "sweet and savoury," to the latter it is "noxious poison." Looking at Paul's admonition to examine oneself before eating, Calvin places the believer's confession of Christ first. We must lean "on the salvation obtained by Christ..." Next Calvin asks that the believer seek his own heart in his "imitation of Christ." Is the person "prepared to give himself to his brethren, and to hold himself in common with those with whom he has Christ in common..." as they are one with Christ so must they be one with their brothers and sisters. (40)

Our Worthiness for Communion Found in Jesus Christ

And yet, because the Christian may fear that they are unworthy to take communion, Calvin directs them to the righteousness of Christ:

For while Christ is therein given us for food, we perceive that without him we fail, pine, and waste away, just as hunger destroys the vigour of the body.

Next, as he is given for life, we perceive that without him we are certainly dead. Wherefore, the best and only worthiness which we can bring to God, is to offer him our vileness, and, if I may so speak unworthiness, that his mercy may make us worthy; to despond in ourselves, that we may be consoled in him; to humble ourselves, that we may be justified by him; to aspire, moreover, to the unity which he recommends in the Supper; and, as he makes us all one in himself to desire to have all one soul, one heart, one tongue. (42)

In his final pages on this subject Calvin sets down orders for the sacraments which focus on our love of Christ and our love for each other as well as simplicity in style. He encourages the Church to offer communion at least once a week since it is a sign of the believers union with Christ. Calvin, in fact, using the text, Acts 2:42, encourages the Church to offer communion at each worship service. He writes, "Thus we ought always to provide that no meeting of the Church is held without the Word, prayer, the dispensation of the Supper and alms." (44)

Calvin's final paragraphs are concerned with the Roman Catholic's insistence, at the time, of only offering the wine to those who were priests. What is of interest to the contemporary Church in this part is just a few lines. He writes of how the Medieval Church "snatched or robbed half of the Supper from the greater part of the people of God" and here he makes his case for an equality of grace among the people of God when he refers to the Roman names for the laity as "laics and profane." In an aside he writes, "such are the titles which they give to God's heritage." Calvin thereby pulls together the important focus of his chapter on communion: that believers are the adopted children of God, joined to Jesus Christ in his resurrection, and given life by his life.

A Conclusion

Following through all that Calvin covers in his chapters on the sacraments, seeing the Father's promises and gifts, one gladly leans back into the safety of his eternal keeping power. Cleansed by the blood of Christ, regenerated by his death, enlightened and led by the Holy Spirit, the Christian rejoices in his or her baptism.

Understood by the proclamation of God's Word, baptism is a sign and seal of all of God's promises and good blessings whose only foundation is Jesus Christ.

United to Christ, the resurrected Son of the Father, the believer feeds on true food. By faith Christians are blessed by the bread and wine which drives them to the cross where Christ gave his life that they might have eternal life and be nourished forever by him. Neither apostates nor unrepentant sinners can change the gift. They simply bring condemnation to themselves. It is God's alone, marked by his Word.

Because Christ is the one bread, those united to him are one body. The Church, hearing the Word of God, partaking of the sacraments, is called out to be in loving fellowship with one another. They are called to good works, and yet, the Father looks on those united to his Son and sees the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Henry Beveridge, trans., John Murray, Intro., reprint, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing 1989).
² Numbers in parenthesis within the text are the numbered paragraphs in Calvin's text.
³ Unless quoting Calvin all Scriptural references are: *New American Standard Bible*, (The Lockman Foundation).

Viola Larson is an elder in Sacramento, CA. She has an MA in History/Humanities and is a member of Evangelical Ministries to New Religions. Mrs. Larson writes for Voices of Orthodox Women. She is a Board member of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry.

We urgently need your support!
Postage costs have increased significantly!
Please consider sending a donation today to:

Theology Matters
P. O. Box 3940
Fredericksburg, VA 22402

Baptism And The *Munus Triplex*

By Randall Otto

This article is reprinted with permission from the *Evangelical Quarterly* 76 (2004) 217-225.

The *munus triplex*, or threefold office of Christ, has been a standard Reformed means of delineating the work of Christ as prophet, priest, and king ever since Calvin formulated it in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (II, xv, i-vi). Among Reformed confessional statements, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) defines “Christ” in terms of the threefold office and “Christian” as participation in the *munus triplex*. Thus, Jesus is called “Christ,” i.e., the “Anointed One,” “because he is ordained by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be *our chief Prophet and Teacher*, fully revealing to us the secret purpose and will of God concerning our redemption; to be *our only High Priest*, having redeemed us by the one sacrifice of his body and ever interceding for us with the Father; and to be *our eternal King*, governing us by his Word and Spirit, and defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us” (Q. 31). A “Christian” is so called, “because through faith I share in Christ and thus in his anointing, so that I may confess his name, offer myself a living sacrifice of gratitude to him, and fight against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life and hereafter rule with him in eternity over all creatures” (Q. 32). Curiously, the Heidelberg Catechism, as well as Zacharias Ursinus’s *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (1591) and most subsequent expositions of Reformed theology, fail to connect this “sharing in Christ” and “anointing” with baptism.¹

The threefold office is generally introduced in Reformed theology texts under the rubric of the death and atoning work of Christ.² How does one participate in the death of Christ, however, except by baptism? “All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death” (Rom 6:3). Baptism serves as an apt metaphor of Jesus’ death (Luke 12:50), though Reformed theology, following Calvin, has generally viewed baptism more in terms of washing than of death, burial, and resurrection.³

The significance of baptism also includes identification with and submission to God’s Word, anointing with God’s Spirit, and confirmation as God’s son. Each of these three aspects of baptism may be subsumed under the threefold office of Christ to include those who

“share in Christ and thus in his anointing” through baptism as prophet, priest, and king, respectively. It will be maintained here that Jesus’ baptism served just these three functions. While Jesus’ baptism *uniquely* served to identify him with God’s Word and submission to it as a prophet, to anoint him with God’s Spirit as a priest, and to confirm him as God’s Son and thus king, the Christian shares in each of these callings by means of baptism.

1. Baptism as Identification With and Submission to God’s Word: The Calling of a Prophet

Each of the synoptic gospels portrays John the Baptist “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; cf. Matt 3:6-11). When Jesus came to receive this baptism, however, John “tried to deter him” (Matt 3:14), saying it was he who needed baptism by Jesus, not vice versa. Jesus had no need of repentance or forgiveness, being without sin according to the tradition (Acts 3:14; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 7:26; 1 Pet 1:19); thus, Jesus’ baptism may not have signified for him precisely what it did for all others who came. Since Jesus was *not* coming for baptism to receive forgiveness of sin, it is difficult to accept the common view that Jesus’ purpose in baptism was to identify with the people in their need.⁴ Furthermore, if Jesus was without sin and thus the need of repentance, it is also difficult to see how his being baptized could set an example for his followers.⁵

Jesus’ reply, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3:15) suggests his baptism was necessary for that particular point in time (“now”) in fulfillment of a divine command. The command was *not* that he be baptized *per se*, but rather that he “fulfill all righteousness.” Baptism identified Jesus with John and the culmination of the entire prophetic line (cf. Matt 11:11-15), marking Jesus out as a disciple of John and serving as Jesus’ public call to be the consummate prophet.⁶ In baptism, Jesus identifies himself as an adherent of John and the entire prophetic line, embracing the law and the prophets which he came not to abolish, but to fulfill (Matt 5:17).

Assuming that John had indeed recognized Jesus as the Coming One, we would wonder what other

response he could have made than to object, "I need to be baptized by you," that is, "I need to become *your* disciple." Jesus' counter-argument that he needed to fulfill all righteousness (Matt. 3:15) is congruent with this interpretation, since "doing righteousness," in the Old Testament sense meant "carrying out the will of God." Jesus, as the righteous man, would naturally see alignment with and submission to God's prophet as necessary in order to do God's will.⁷

"Now" thus signifies the transition then occurring from the old covenant culminating in John, the last of the great OT prophets, to the new covenant and the ministry of Jesus "the prophet." "Jesus regarded his ministry as in continuity with, and bringing to a climax, the work of the great prophets of the Old Testament, culminating in John the Baptist."⁸ Inasmuch as a particular *call* was necessary to be a prophet, as well as continuity with the teaching of the great prophetic tradition, it would have been necessary for Jesus to receive baptism by John to indicate his continuity with the OT proclamation of God's Word and will. That Jesus received at baptism a vision of heaven being *opened* is in keeping with the prophetic call (Matt 3:16; cf. Ezek 1:1; Acts 10:11), as is his endowment with the Spirit.⁹

In his baptism, then, Jesus identifies *not so much with sinners*, but rather *with God*, submitting to the call of God to proclaim his righteousness, "to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, fully revealing to us the secret purpose and will of God concerning our redemption." Similarly, when sinners *repent*, they change their perspective (*metanoëō*) from the fallen human will to sin by taking the holy divine will to righteousness. Their baptism thus signifies and seals the call of God upon them to "share in Christ and thus in his anointing" so they "may confess his name" in lives of faithful obedience.

Those who are Christians merely in appearance are those who have been baptized, and who are in the company of those who are called, and profess the Christian faith; but are without conversion.... Those are true Christians [*sic*] who are not only baptized and profess the doctrine of Christ, but who are also possessed of a true faith, and declare this by the fruits of repentance; or, they are those who are members of Christ by a true faith, and are made partakers of his anointing.¹⁰

Baptism is thus a public identification with and submission to God's Word in Jesus Christ. As the *Directory for Worship* (W-2.3006) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) says, "baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world." It is thus the responsibility of all who have been baptized, who have identified

themselves with God and his Word, to take on the prophetic role to speak on behalf of God and his righteous will in both word and deed.

2. Baptism Signifies Anointing With God's Spirit: The Calling of a Priest

Jesus' baptism was accompanied by the descent of the Spirit of God upon him, anointing, consecrating, and gifting him for the ministry to which God called him. Baptism is a consecration to service precisely because of the working of the Holy Spirit in and through the water. Anointing was a ceremony by which prophets, priests, and kings were set apart by God for their offices in the OT. As Ursinus notes,¹¹ anointing signified: 1. "An ordination, or calling, to the office for which they were thus set apart." Luke's observation that Jesus was "about thirty years old when he began his ministry" (Luke 3:23), occurring as it does right after his baptism, may suggest his anointing at baptism was a call to priestly ministry, since that is the age at which Levitical priests began their ministries (Num 4:3, 23, 30, 35, 39, 43, 47). 2. "It signified the promise and bestowment of the gifts necessary" for their calling. In his baptism, Peter says, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power" (Acts 10:37-38). That power was immediately demonstrated in Jesus' overcoming the devil in the wilderness and ultimately in his triumph on the cross as "our only High Priest, having redeemed us by the one sacrifice of his body and ever interceding for us with the Father."

Although Martin Bucer's reform of the baptismal rite at Strasbourg in 1524 eliminated "the prebaptismal and postbaptismal anointings" as a primitive church superstition,¹² there was never any question for the Reformers that, as a sacrament, baptism is a means of grace *because of the work, or anointing, of the Holy Spirit*. The Westminster Confession says, "the grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments is not conferred by any power in them," but instead is contingent "upon the work of the Spirit." Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers and their children by the working of the Spirit.

As disciples of the Christ, Christians share in Jesus' anointing. Just as Jesus in his baptism was "anointed with the Holy Spirit to undertake the way of the servant manifested in his sufferings, death, and resurrection" (*Directory for Worship* 2.300), so Christians are in their baptism anointed with the Holy Spirit to take up their cross and follow Jesus as God's servants.

Just as the Spirit furnished Jesus at baptism with gifts for his priestly offering up of himself, so the Spirit furnishes believers and their children with the gifts necessary to offer themselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God (Rom 12:1). Baptism thus signifies anointing with God's Spirit to serve

sacrificially in the ministry of the “royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9).

3. Baptism Signifies Confirmation as God’s Son: The Calling of a King

At his baptism, Jesus hears a voice from heaven confirming him as God’s Son, in whom God is well pleased (Matt 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). This confirmation is a quote from Ps 2:7, a royal psalm used in the coronation of Davidic kings, confirming their place as the Lord’s “Anointed One” (Ps 2:2), his “King installed on Zion” (Ps 2:6), God’s “Son” (Ps 2:7). As God’s representative and vicegerent, the Davidic king was spoken of as God’s son (cf. 2 Sam 7:14).

In the case of Jesus, God the Son incarnate, the titular significance of “son” applied to previous Davidic kings is heightened by the ontological significance of his being of one essence with God. In John’s gospel, after Jesus is baptized and anointed with the Holy Spirit, he makes his first disciples in Galilee. In response to Jesus’ prescience, “Nathanael declared, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel’” (John 1:49). Similarly, in Matt 4:17 and Mark 1:15, after Jesus’ baptism and victory over the devil in the wilderness, he comes forth preaching “the kingdom of heaven [God] is near.” In Jesus, God’s Son the King, the kingdom is near.

The whole point of it was that Israel’s dream was coming true *right now*. Equally important, it could never be divorced from the person and deeds of the proclaimer. This will have been as true for John the Baptist as for Jesus. *This* baptism is the ‘getting-ready-for-the-kingdom’ baptism; *this* proclamation is the one that is actually inaugurating the kingdom.¹³

In his baptism, then, Jesus is already declared God’s Son and thus “our eternal King, governing us by his Word and Spirit, and defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us.”

Those who follow Jesus in baptism and share “in his anointing” are responsible to “fight against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life and hereafter rule with him in eternity over all creatures.” As heirs together with him, it is the Christian’s duty to rule over all things, not just “hereafter” “in eternity,” but here and now, according to the stewardship given humanity in creation to rule over all things as God’s representatives. Traditionally known as the *cultural mandate* (Gen 1:26; Ps 8:4-8), Christians have, by virtue of their baptism, a calling and a responsibility to bring all things under the Lordship and dominion of Jesus Christ. As “the disciples were empowered by the outpouring of the Spirit to undertake

a life of service and to be an inclusive worshipping community, sharing life in which love, justice, and mercy abounded” (*Directory for Worship* 2.3002), so Christians in all ages are to work for the reconciliation of humanity that is testified in “the bond of unity” they have in baptism (*Directory for Worship* 2.3005). Believing adults confirm this regal calling personally in their baptism; their baptized children confirm it when they become adults. For Calvin, baptism necessitated instruction in the faith unto proper Christian living.

The purpose of catechetical instruction was to prepare the child to make an intelligent profession of faith. It was the profession of faith implied, even demanded, by the baptism of the child. Just as the living of the Christian life was demanded by baptism, so was the profession of Christian faith. The solemn profession of faith was the logical working out of the sacrament of baptism.¹⁴

The confirmation of Jesus as God’s Son and thus as King is a calling those baptized in Jesus’ name confirm and share as heirs together with him.

Conclusion

The baptism of Jesus by John signals the public commencement of Jesus’ calling as prophet, priest and king. Karl Barth rightly noted that Jesus *was born* to the ministry of prophet, priest, and king; this “does not mean that He was not yet the Messiah, Prophet, Priest and King, that He had not yet begun His ministry, that He received and entered upon His office only with His baptism in the Jordan.”¹⁵ Indeed, Reformed theology has maintained that “Christ was never not a prophet, as he was never not a saviour and mediator. But he was chiefly so when he appeared in the flesh.”¹⁶ He was publicly validated as prophet, priest, and king in his baptism.

As this act of His, the baptism of Jesus was, in a typical and decisive way for His whole history, the first and basic act of His self-proclamation as the mediator between God and men. In it the ministry of reconciling the world to God began to take place, and to do so indeed as His own history. In it He came forward as the One in whose person and work all that John had announced—the kingdom, judgment and forgiveness of God—was now to take place.¹⁷

It is worth noting that the three aspects of John’s preaching Barth sees fulfilled in Jesus’ baptism, the kingdom, judgment, and forgiveness, correspond well to the *munus triplex* and the functions of king, prophet, and priest, respectively. It was to these offices that Jesus was born and publicly acclaimed in his baptism. It is to these offices that followers of Jesus are born and publicly acclaimed in their baptism.

1. The standard compendium of classical Reformed theology, Heinrich Hepppe's *Reformed Dogmatics* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950 rep.), does not link the *munus triplex* either with Christ's baptism or with the Christian's in its sections on Christ's mediatorial work or baptism. It joins but one of Christ's offices, that of prophet, to his baptism by John, saying, "Christ's public prophetic function began with the full participation of his humanity in it, from the moment he was baptized by John" (456).
2. Most recently, for example, Donald K. McKim, *Introducing the Reformed Faith* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001) 94, after discussing theories of the atonement and the death of Christ. Daniel Migliore uses the threefold office as a way of interweaving the various theories of the atonement (*Faith Seeking Understanding* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991] 155).
3. Hughes O. Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 173-74. Note the repeated focus on washing in The Heidelberg Catechism, Questions 69-73, as also in The Second Helvetic Confession, chapter 20.
4. As, e.g., Donald Hagner, *Matthew* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1993) 1:57, following George Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 45-67.
5. As, e.g., Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984) 51. Other suggested interpretations may be found in W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 1:321-23. Their own suggestion, that Jesus went to John to "receive a pledge of ultimate deliverance . . . from the imminent eschatological flood" is not persuasive.
6. Davies and Allison (*Matthew*, 1:326) consider such an interpretation "the most convincing" in light of Matthew's persistent use of *plēroō* for OT prophetic fulfillment, together with the OT prophetic allusions in the baptismal event itself.
7. William B. Badke, "Was Jesus a Disciple of John?," *EvQ* 62 (1990):200.
8. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 167.
9. M. Eugene Boring, "Prophecy (Early Christianity)," *ABD* 5:498.
10. Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.) 176.
11. *Ibid.*, 170.
12. Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 55.
13. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 228.
14. Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 224. It should be noted, however, that Calvin did not follow Martin Bucer in developing a Reformed rite of confirmation. "Confirmation was an offense to Calvin because it, like penance, sapped the meaning of baptism. . . . Confirmation tended to take away the positive aspects of baptism as a sign of spiritual renewal and the gift of the Holy Spirit. For Calvin baptism was a sign under which the whole of the Christian life was to be lived" (*ibid.*, 225).
15. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), III/2, 57.
16. Hepppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 455.
17. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), IV/4, 61.

Rev. Randall Otto, Ph.D., is interim pastor of Green Hill Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, DE. He is also on the Board of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry.

Come Join Us Working for Renewal in the Presbyterian Church (USA)

Join us in being a voice calling the Presbyterian Church(USA) and individual Presbyterians back to Reformed Christian faith rooted in Scripture and our Confessions while also rejecting false gods and their ideologies.

_____ Enclosed are names and addresses of people I think would be interested in receiving *Theology Matters*.

_____ Yes, I would like to contribute to the work of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry

Please consider a donation to this important ministry! We urgently need your support!

Donations to PFFM are tax deductible.

Name

Church

Presbytery

Address

City

State

Zip

Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry, Inc.,

P.O. Box 3940, Fredericksburg, VA 22402, (540) 898-4244, email (scyre@swva.net)

The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry
P.O. Box 3940
Fredericksburg, VA 22402

Change Service Requested

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
AUTOMATED
MAILING
SYSTEM