

THE WATERS THAT DIVIDE?

To say that the subject of baptism is controversial within the Christian church would be an understatement. Entire segments of the church are built around different views of baptism. The “when” and “how” and “what effect” of baptism become the banks of the rivers that divide our communions into denominations. Are we supposed to baptize infants, or are we supposed to baptize only those who can make a conscious, verbal, mature profession of faith? If we settle that issue, some will then ask, “How is the water to be applied? Are we to sprinkle a little on the head, pour water over the head or plunge the entire body into the water?”

While the hackles on people’s backs are raised when discussing any one of these questions, people really become antsy when the issue of baptismal efficacy is broached. Just how effective is baptism in God’s work of salvation? Is it effective at all? Is baptism merely an outward washing which serves as a pointer to what is (or should be) happening “on the inside?” Does baptism secure a place in the final salvation of God’s people? The answers to these questions sometimes seem as numerous as the people you ask.

Closely connected to this whole question of the efficacy of baptism is, of course, the activity of the Spirit in relation to baptism. It has become popular in the ranks of the evangelical churches to maintain a sharp distinction between Spirit baptism (the “real” baptism) and water baptism (the pointer to the “real” baptism). Spirit baptism is what really counts in this line of thought. Water baptism is a good witness—indeed, a commanded witness—but it is relatively unnecessary. (I.e., “If you have the ‘real’ baptism, then it doesn’t really matter much if you have the water baptism.”) Others would say that there is no division between the Spirit and the water: the Spirit is always active in the waters of baptism.

The purpose of this paper is to interact with some of these questions. What follows is the edited version of a series of sermons that I preached to my church concerning certain “controversial” issues and texts that surround the sacrament of baptism. I do not presume to have the final, definitive answers to all these questions. But I do hope, in some small way to contribute to the peace and purity of the church. My prayer is that we will see that the waters that divide us proclaim just the opposite and demand that we work toward a loving unity which does not anathematize every slightly divergent opinion.

BAPTISM: A MEANS OF GRACE

To begin I guess I must lay my theological cards on the table. I am within one of the Reformed branches of the church. I am Reformed ... at least I think I am. Let’s see: God is absolutely sovereign over everything. He has foreordained whatever comes to pass. He has even foreordained who will be baptized and who will not be baptized. *And* he has foreordained which ones of the baptized will inherit final salvation.

God relates to his entire creation (which includes the people within it) in covenantal terms. He sovereignly enters into covenant with particular people giving them responsibilities and promises. Those who are faithful to their responsibilities will be blessed and inherit the promises. Those who are unfaithful in their responsibilities will be cursed and will not inherit the promises.

Relating to people according to these terms means consistently throughout the Scriptures that God includes within this covenant the children of the parents who are in covenant. These children are not a part of the world but are a part of the people of God. While sin divides parents from the children, God in his grace restores the children to their parents. Thus, we are not cut off

from our children. God promises that he will be a God to us and to our children just as he did to Abraham, our father (Rom 4:16). And because we believe the promises of God like Abraham our father, we give our children the sign of the covenant, which, in the New Covenant, is baptism.¹

The sole ground of our right relationship with God is Jesus Christ and his work. He is the only Mediator between God and man. Only through his cross and resurrection do we have forgiveness of sins and life from the dead. The only means of receiving the full benefits of what God has done in Christ is a living and active faith. Apart from faith it is impossible to please God. Apart from faith it is impossible to inherit the promises of God.

Up to this point I have probably said nothing which is highly controversial within the Reformed branch of the church. All of this would probably qualify me as being Reformed. But there is a teaching that is fairly consistent within the historical Reformed tradition that is highly contentious within the modern Reformed church: the efficacy of the sacraments. Most Reformed folks don't have a problem of mouthing the words, "sacraments are means of grace."² Where the discussion reaches a fevered pitch concerns what exactly "means of grace" means. So, in the spirit of laying my theological cards on the table, I want to explain what I believe the Scripture teaches concerning baptism as a means of grace.

Whenever someone begins to speak about God using the sacraments to save us--e.g. our sins are washed away in baptism or Christ giving us His life in the Lord's Supper--we tend to become uncomfortable. Our discomfort is in some ways justified because of the distortions that have crept into the theology of the sacraments throughout the centuries. But in our discomfort with statements such as I made above, we must be careful not to fall into the other ditch. We must understand that the sacraments are means of *grace*--i.e., God does show us his special favor in and through the sacraments, giving us particular gifts. But we must also understand that the sacraments are *means* of grace--i.e., they are the instruments God uses and not the source of the grace itself.

Staying on the Biblical road here is difficult at times because of our tendency to over-emphasize or under-emphasize while we guard one thing or another. That is, those who seek to protect the Biblical doctrine of the sacraments and the relative necessity of them, tend to over-emphasize them as if God never works apart from the sacraments. Those who seek to protect the Biblical doctrine of God's sovereign grace have the tendency to under-emphasize the sacraments as if God never works through the sacraments but always works immediately--i.e., without

¹I do not believe that the best argument for the baptism of our infants is found solely in the circumcision = baptism argument. While I believe that this is part of it, I believe that it is part of a larger context about what God is doing in fulfilling his purposes of creating a new humanity. In short, God redeems and moves humanity forward in the way that he intended from the beginning. God's intention from the beginning was for man--man + woman--to be fruitful and multiply. The children would have been included among God's family. God has not changed plans. His plans are for a new humanity. Our children, though conceived in sin, are graciously cleansed and brought into the family of God. For a fuller treatment of this see Peter's Leithart's *The Sociology of Infant Baptism*, (*Christendom Essays*, ed. James B. Jordan, 1997) 86-106.

²I am not completely happy with the phrase "means of grace." It is not because it is an inadequate phrase. Rightly understood it is just fine. The problem comes (as I will explain below) in the way that we understand "grace." There has been a tendency to think of grace as a "substance" that is infused. The means of grace then become conduits or pipes that carry this "thing" called grace and infuses it into the person receiving the sacraments. I believe this whole paradigm is flawed in the way grace is approached. Grace is not an animate or inanimate object that is somehow put into a person. For lack of a better way of explaining it, grace is more of a disposition which expresses itself in tangible as well as intangible ways. When God is gracious he is not merely giving us a "thing" that is somehow separated from himself. Rather he is giving us himself and expressing it in these particular ways.

means. While I understand each person's desire to protect these precious Biblical doctrines, neither one of them protects the Biblical doctrine if they distort the Biblical doctrine of God's use of means. Extremism in either direction is distortion and, thus, wrong.

As we study the sacrament of baptism, the initiation into covenant with the Triune God, it is important that we understand, at least to a degree, what God is doing through this sacrament in the life of the church. Although all that God does in the baptism is somewhat mysterious and unknowable in its particulars to us, we do have many Biblical indications of what He does through the sacrament of baptism. Simply put, baptism is the rite of initiation into the church of Jesus Christ. The nature of the church itself determines the meaning and efficacy of baptism. That is, the nature of the body into which one is initiated tells you what the rite of initiation accomplishes. According to the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 28.1, "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. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world."

Before delving into the sacrament itself, we need to have a good biblical foundation. So we are going to look at God's use of means in a more general sense. In this I am going to answer the questions (even though briefly), what are means? how does God use means? do physical means have anything to do with that which is immaterial?

GOD'S ORDINARY USE OF MEANS IN CREATION

Because the sacraments involve elements of creation, some biblical truths about creation need to be summarized. Instead of moving right into the use of the elements of creation in the sacrament, we will take one step back and look at the subject and how it pertains to all of life. For our purposes, I want to make two assertions which should be readily accepted. (1) Creation is not evil in and of itself. (2) God ordinarily works through that which he has created to accomplish his purposes. We will deal with these in order.

Creation is not evil.

As Christians we believe that our God is the Creator of heaven and earth and all that they contain. At the creation of the world, God pronounced all things that He had created 'very good' (Gen 1:31). Some may leap to the conclusion that after the fall this status of creation has changed. But this is not true. It is true that man, the apex of creation and the image of God, fell into the bondage of sin and God's image became distorted in him. It is also true that this fall affected the creation in that it was under his headship. But it is *not* true that the material world became sinful. Man is sinful. Creation is not sinful.

This view of the material world affirmed throughout the Scripture. Jesus affirms this when he says:

Mark 7:18-23 And He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him; because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?"(Thus He declared all foods clean.) And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts,

fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. “All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.”

Evil comes from men, not from creation (i.e., material things; matter). Creation, the material world created by God, is good. Paul echoes this fundamental when he is instructing Timothy concerning false teachers in 1 Timothy 4:4 “For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving.” He says that those who teach otherwise teach “doctrines of demons” (1 Tim 4:1). Creation is not evil and need not be shunned, only used in the way God prescribes and thanks returned to God for it.

Indeed creation is being set free from the effects of sin into which the fall brought it. Paul says in Romans 8:19-23 that the creation is being set free and will be completely set free when the sons of God are revealed (i.e., at the coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead). Though everything must and will be transformed in the new creation, the basic goodness of creation is certainly affirmed. There is no smell of dualism which regards the material as “evil” and the immaterial as “good.”

I emphasize this point because there seems to be a general idea among many professing Christians that God cannot do “spiritual” things through “material” (i.e., created) things. And even if God does do “spiritual” things through “material” substance, this is not ordinarily the way God works. God does “spiritual” things invisibly and without the use of physical means. God does physical things through physical means. This is the basic dichotomy that seems to underlie many of the wrong-headed views of the sacraments in general and baptism in particular. There exists this dualism in the universe for some (in theory) that creation/the material world is bad (or at the least cannot be of any spiritual value) and that the unseen “spirit” world is what is good. This is not Christianity. This is the doctrine of demons.

Much of Western Protestantism is more in line with Plato than they are with the Scriptures when it comes to understanding the sacraments. In fact, from what I have observed, it seems that the Scriptures are read through the lens of Platonic philosophy which is the prevailing culture in which we live. All that we see and what happens in history are mere shadows, pictures of reality. If you want to get to what is real, for example, history must be shucked down so that we can get to the kernel called “reality” or “ultimate reality.” While some do not and would not go so far as to say the material world is evil, there still remains a dualism between the material (the shucks) and the immaterial (the kernel, reality).

The way we approach Scripture and interpret it are indicative of our view of salvation and, thus, the sacraments. The story and stories of Scripture are sometimes treated simply as shells that contain the truth tucked away inside. The story is really something extra. The “timeless truth” (the kernel) doesn’t have to be connected to these particular stories. What must be done in Scripture is to extract from these stories what is really going on.

This approach to Scripture then molds our view of salvation and all that it means. Salvation must be narrowed down to a few “timeless truths” or particular doctrines that can be understood apart from history. History and the physical events that go on around us are mere shells that house these invisible doctrines. So instead of seeing people in terms of participating in salvation that is worked out in history, redemption and salvation are narrowed down to an ahistorical “substance” that doesn’t need the trappings of history or material things. Reality is the immaterial, the things we cannot see. History is the relatively meaningless shucks that contain reality. Reality may happen *in* history. But reality is not historical events.

By no means is this a monolithic way of thinking. Some within this way of thinking have

a higher view of historical events than others. There is a broad spectrum of thought within this way of dealing with historical events. But the common thread that characterizes those who think this way is that history (material, physical events) are the mere dross that must be separated from the pure gold. The pure gold is the immaterial, (wrongly labeled) “spiritual” event that goes on in an individuals “innards.”

This is one reason, I believe, we have such a problem in understanding the Exodus from Egypt as “redemption” or even “salvation.” “That was ‘physical’ redemption that was ‘picture’ of what Jesus would really give us.” Even though the Scripture calls the Exodus by these names and parallels New Covenant salvation to it, we have determined that these are only “pictures,” because, of course, we know better than God how to describe what he has done. I suggest that if we don’t have the framework to be able to view historical events in this way, it is not Scripture that needs to be molded. It is our framework that needs to be adjusted.

God ordinarily works through creation.

One fundamental Biblical worldview issue is how we view creation, the material world, and, therefore, history. History and the material world are not throw away items to this whole process. The Bible teaches that God works with, in, and through that which He has created to accomplish His purposes. This simply means that in His providence--i.e., God’s preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions--God uses *means* to accomplish His plans and purposes.

Some Christians have fallen prey to the notion that the world is governed by “natural laws.” The only time that God works (in this view) is when something goes against that which is expected “naturally.” Again, this is a pagan view. There is no such thing as an impersonal force called “natural law” driving the universe with God intervening once-in-a-while to suspend those laws. The Biblical teaching is that God preserves and governs everything, upholding all things by the word of His power (Heb 1:3). God is at work in what we would call the “ordinary” things of life. The day-to-day experiences of breathing, eating, sleeping, etc. are all governed and sustained by our God who is active in His creation. God’s ordinary providence is “predictable” to a great degree because we see how He works in cause-and-effect type relationships.

These things are so common that we fail to see the truth behind them. If I were to ask the question, “How is a child created?” some of you would answer, “God created the child” and others would probably say, “A man and a woman created the child.” The fact is that both of these answers are correct. In order for life to be, God must do the work that gives life. But in order for life to come about, certain biological processes are at work. In ordinary situations, the conception of a child takes the biological substance of a man and a woman. If these two things are not present, life will not come about.

So then, who creates life? A man and a woman or God? Again, the answer is both. God uses the means that He has created in order for life to be formed. Ordinarily God works in concord with the way He has created the universe in order to bring life about ... even though He is not bound to it. There was a time in history in which a child was conceived extraordinarily, in the womb of a virgin. But to say that the conception of Jesus is the only time that God really worked in the conception of a child would be to deny that God is the Giver of all life.

One of our problems is that we want to scrutinize the extraordinary like it should be the ordinary. That is, “If God works it will be in this spectacular way, outside of the mundane happenings in all of life.” This is simply not true. This is a deistic view of God. Refusing to acknowledge that God works through means is biblical foolishness and “creates” a god who sits

off in the distance only coming down to stir the pot with a “miracle” every now and then.

How is life sustained? Does God sustain life or is life sustained by food, water, oxygen, etc.? Again, the answer is both. Or, more precisely, it is God working in and through that which He has created in order to sustain life. In other words, God sustains life, but if a man does not eat for an extended period of time, he will die. Why? Is it because God could not sustain life? No. It is because God has appointed means in order to sustain the life of man.

This is not something that is only true after the fall. In fact, the first thing recorded for us in Scripture that God spoke to man are these words: Gen. 1:29 “And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for [food].” Man in his unfallen state (i.e., sinless) still needed food to survive because these were the divinely appointed means for his survival. Man is reminded by the use of food that he is a dependent creature, in need of the grace of God at all times. This is essentially what is said in Deuteronomy 8:3 “And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” Peter Leithart makes the observation concerning this fact when he says, “By its very deadness, food discloses that, beyond our dependence on food, our life is completely dependent on the Word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”³ We are taught by Christ to pray for our *daily bread* because God uses the bread to sustain our lives. But we are taught to *pray* for our daily bread because we realize that it is God who ultimately sustains our lives.

Far from being completely mystical and mysterious, we find that the Bible teaches that God uses means to create and sustain life. God uses “ordinary,” “material,” created things to accomplish things in the “immaterial world;” i.e., life itself. What is *life*? Is it simply the heart beating, the lungs breathing, the synapses firing? If that were the case, you could maintain life by machine. But what is amazing is that when a person doesn’t eat—a very physical activity—he loses life—this relatively unexplainable phenomenon. The material and the immaterial are united, not radically separated.

GOD’S ORDINARY USE OF MEANS IN SALVATION

It is usually okay to speak about God’s use of means in these things. But when we come to the area of God’s special works of grace, especially in salvation, people usually bolt. But the Bible teaches that God uses means in the salvation of men at every stage. Even though the Westminster Standards use the phrase “means of grace” (cf. e.g., WLC 195), our comfort level decreases when we hear that phrase. To speak about “means of grace” is “Romish” or “Eastern Orthodox.” What we find in the Scriptures, though, is that God uses those things which He has ordained to accomplish His plans and purposes. In other words, God works through His ordained means—e.g., baptism.

At issue with baptism is more than what we think about “water” *per se*. It is about what we think about God’s word given to us in the sacrament of baptism. For example, what separated the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil from all the other trees in the Garden? As far as their appearance, they are described just like all the other trees in the Garden. What separated these trees from the others was the word of God declaring them to be different

³Leithart, *Blessed Are The Hungry: Meditations on the Lord’s Supper*, 19.

and bestow certain things. The question: Was the word of God which declared these trees to be what they were effective in bringing about what ordained? The clear answer to that would have to be, “yes.” It wasn’t that the trees were magical. It was because God had declared something about those trees that made them different than all the other trees. This is not “natural law” or things working “automatically” or “magically.” What God declares things to be they are.

God ordains means to accomplish special purposes

Sometimes God ordains seemingly unusual means to accomplish His extraordinary purposes. A good example of this is seen in the life of Samson. The story of Samson begins in Judg. 13. In short, Samson was to be a Nazarite from birth. (Cf. Num 6:1-21). Included within the Nazarite vow was the prohibition against cutting one’s hair. Normally, a Nazarite was not promised super-human strength. But in the case of Samson, God had a special purpose for which this strength would be needed; i.e., to deliver His people from the oppression of Philistines. The interesting thing about this is that Samson’s strength was tied to his hair.

Now, the question is, What does hair have to do with strength physiologically? As far as we know from anything we have studied about the human being, nothing. But in this one case, God declared that Samson’s strength would be tied to his hair. No matter what else he did (because he broke his vow in many other ways), as long as he had his hair, he was strong.

When Samson got a hair cut, you would think that the Bible would say, “And Samson became weak.” But such is not the case. The Bible says, “And Samson did not know that YHWH had departed from him” (Judg. 16:20). God had so ordained the means by which Samson would retain his strength, that God had bound Himself to that ordinance. When Samson’s hair grew back, he was strong again (see Judg. 16:22-30).

God ordains certain means to accomplish His special purposes. Rejection or neglect of those means brings about particular consequences. We can see this illustrated in Prov. 22:15: “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.”

“Foolishness” deals with sinful behavior. Children are born with foolish hearts in need of a change. The Bible says that the rod of correction can change the heart. It doesn’t say that it will make him externally conformed to particular rules. Now we know that only God changes the heart. But God uses means in order to accomplish this end in ordinary circumstances.

There are some “spiritual” parents, I am sure, who are just waiting for God to zap their children in some mystical experience. But God has ordained means by which our children are to be zapped, and He says that it will change their hearts. Failure to employ these means is not a sign of piety but a sign of unbelief.

Time would fail us to talk about how God uses people to walk around walls and blow trumpets to win a war (Joshua 6), or how a good choir won a victory over three enemy armies (2Chron 20), or how a stick causes an ax head to float in the water (2Kings 6). The point is this: When God ordains means and they are employed in obedience to Him, they are effective for that which He ordains.

God ordains means for spiritual life.

Something important to note is that “spiritual” in the Bible means “of, with, or by the Spirit.” It is not synonymous with “mystical” and “immaterial.” Although the Spirit does move in mysterious ways and many of the things He does are unseen, this does not rule out the fact that

He uses material means to accomplish His purposes in our eternal salvation.

The Spirit produces the fruit. But ordinarily He uses ordained means to do it. For instance, if I were to ask you, “How is a person saved?” You would rightly say “By believing on the Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. Acts 16:31). The Bible says that without the preaching of the gospel, people cannot be saved. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (cf. Rom. 10:14-17). God has chosen the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe (1Cor 1:21). The Spirit uses the proclaimed word to convert the sinner.

Now, the question comes, “Can the Spirit work apart from the proclaimed word.” Absolutely. God is not so tied to the means that He has ordained that He cannot work apart from them. But this is extra-ordinary. To neglect the proclamation of the gospel because God can save people apart from the proclamation of the gospel is a sin that will be judged, and people who do not hear the gospel will ordinarily go to hell.

So it is with the sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. “Can God bring a person into the final state of salvation apart from the sacraments?” Absolutely. But ordinarily God works through these along with the Word and prayer to save people. These are God’s ordained means that should not be neglected. Not because God cannot save apart from them, but because God does not ordinarily save apart from them. To neglect these things that God has ordained is the sin of presumption, which God does not look too highly upon.

One problem that we might have is that we believe that if God uses these means to save, it somehow takes away from His grace. It is as if God’s grace is only gracious when He works immediately—without means—on the inner man. (No shucks of the material/historical world, only the kernel of what is “real.”). But is it not God’s grace to give us food to sustain our lives? Why do we not think it less than grace since God does not sustain our lives apart from food, water, air, etc.? God’s grace is shown in the fact that He gives us food and He uses that food to sustain our lives.

God’s grace is shown in that He ordains and gives us the sacraments and then uses the sacraments to accomplish His purposes in our lives (along with His other means of grace). A low view of the sacraments many times comes from a bad view of creation and a dissatisfaction with God working in the ordinary. Coming to the laver of baptism or to the Table of the Lord is not so spectacular. Stars need to fall from heaven, the sun must grow dark, ecstatic utterances must be spoken, I must feel a particular emotion, etc. But that is not what God does. He speaks His word, he pours water over our heads, and He feeds us with bread and wine. This is in part how the Spirit gives and sustains our lives.

As we will see, baptism is the point at which the Triune God declares that he is in relationship with us. This is why we are baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:18-20). Neglect of God’s ordained means is not incidental but could be—and ordinarily is—fatal.

There are three things about God’s means of grace that I want to leave you with so that I am perfectly clear before moving on to the next topic: (1) The means of grace are not the source of life. The means—the water, the bread and wine, or even the spoken word—do not have the source of life residing in them. This ties God’s grace to the means in such a way that life inheres in creation itself. This is not the case. God is the Source of all life. This must never be forgotten nor forsaken.

(2) The means of grace are the instruments of spiritual life. While God is the Source of all life, He has chosen, in His divine sovereignty, to use created means to give and sustain that life. To employ these means in faith—believing and obeying Him—is to have life. To neglect these means is death.

(3) Baptism is not a human work but a divine declaration. Some may think that if we have a high view of baptism, we are encouraging some type of “works righteousness.” The person who thinks that has things all turned around backwards. It is true that some people can think that. But they can think that about anything: reading the Scriptures, praying, attending worship. There is always that danger when people pervert the gospel. But Scripturally speaking baptism is a divine work administered at the hands of the ministers of Christ. It is not a work of man trying to earn favor with God. It is the work of God declaring particular things about man.

We will never be able to understand all that God does. Neither has God called us to understand him fully. In fact, he has declared that we cannot fully comprehend his thoughts or his ways (cf. Isa 55:8-9) . That which he has given us is his word. It is in that word that we are to trust. We are to believe what God says ... even when it comes to the waters of baptism.

BAPTISM: THE INITIATION OF THE COVENANT

In our own baptisms as well as the baptisms that we have witnessed through the years, we have often heard the Trinitarian formula pronounced over the person being baptized. “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This is Christian baptism. This is what our Lord commissioned us to do as we make disciples of the nations. Speaking from personal experience, I have heard much through the years about the doctrine of the Trinity as given to us in this passage but very little about what it means to be baptized “in the name” of the Father, Son and Spirit. To be sure the use of the singular “name” with the three Persons of the Trinity does tell us about the relationship of the Godhead. But that was not the point of what Jesus was saying. It was the *assumption* or *presupposition* of what Jesus was saying. But Jesus was telling us what to do and how to do it. The actions Jesus commissions his church to do have meaning. The meaning of this action of baptism “in the name” of the Father, Son and Spirit is, in one sense, at the heart of the dispute about baptism. In pronouncing this Trinitarian formula over the one being baptized, are we simply being “reminded” that we Christians believe in the Trinity? Are these mere words being recited but have no “real” effect? Is God doing something, or better, declaring something, at the time of baptism about the one(s) being baptized? My intention in this section is to clarify what it means when we are baptized literally “into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

Reformed folks all over the world believe that baptism is the sign and seal of the covenant. While there might be some dispute about baptism being the *initiation* into the covenant (i.e., the children are already in covenant, baptism simply affirms that), there is little dispute about this being the *rite of initiation* into the covenant (i.e., this is the watery rite that declares a person is in covenant with God).

But what is covenant? Covenant in Reformed circles has become one of those words that we don’t really need to define. Everybody knows what *covenant* is. Defining *covenant* would be like having to define *mother*. Really, it is at this point where the basic disagreements begin. So, in order to begin this study on baptism and the Trinitarian formula, we are going to take one step back and take a brief, fresh look at covenant.

COVENANT IS RELATIONSHIP

I must say at the beginning of this section that *covenant* is not defined explicitly in the Scriptures. It is described. God’s covenant with his people (which I will be focusing upon) was not something that was to be analyzed in a scientific manner, neatly dividing things into various

“facts” about the covenant. God’s covenant was something to be lived in, enjoyed, obeyed and given thanks for. The covenant itself was not lexically defined but rather it defined all of life. The covenant was not an object on a shelf but the air which the people of God breathed, the food they ate, the drink they drank and their relationships with others. God’s covenant was the promise of hope for the faithful and the smells of death for those who rebelled against God.

In our age of scientific precision and laser beam accuracy where everything can be put into nice, neat little categories without jagged edges or mystery (so we deceive ourselves into thinking), God reveals his covenant which cannot be treated in this way. The reason for this is that the covenant is a relationship, a living, breathing, dynamic relationship. And relationships are as mysterious as life itself. Yet, like “life,” people know what relationships are and live in them even though they cannot explain them in their totality. Certainly we can give a dictionary definition of “relationship” or “covenant.” But words will not capture the entirety of what we experience in living relationships. Trying to capture with words only what a relationship is would be like a man who has never been married reading all the books he can get his hands on concerning marriage and then trying to tell someone who has been married twenty-five years just what marriage is. Here is what marriage is according to the Oxford English Dictionary: “the formal union of a man and a woman, by which they become husband and wife.” Nothing wrong with that definition. But would any of you who have been married for any length of time say that this captures everything that marriage is? I doubt it.

So it is with God’s covenant. *God’s covenant is the sovereignly administered bond of union and communion with his people with attendant blessings and curses.* That definition will fulfill the dictionary obligations. But for anyone who has read the Scriptures and heard God’s relationship with his people described or been a Christian for a number of years, you know that this does not capture the totality of what it means to live in covenant with God. God’s covenant is his relationship with his people. It is the relationship with his people in which he declares that he will be their God and they will be his people (cf. Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12; Rev 21:3; et. al.). Each individual within that group about which God declares this enjoys this relationship.

I have often heard distinctions made (and have probably made them myself at some point) between a *covenant* relationship (which is redundant) and a *real* relationship. But is there another kind of relationship other than a “covenant” relationship with God? Does God relate to people in some way other than covenantally? The problem with formulating the covenant like this is that the covenant turns into nothing more than some external legal arrangement. Certainly the person “in covenant” has more privileges than the person “outside the covenant.” But those privileges are mere external privileges. The Bible doesn’t present God’s covenant with his people in this fashion. He says that he is their God and they are his people. He does *not* say, “I am a God to those who are faithful and not a God to those who are unfaithful, at least not really (wink, wink, nod, nod).” He is a God to both. And both the faithful and the unfaithful are his people. That which determines the faithfulness and unfaithfulness of each group is precisely the relationship they have with God.

When we hear God speaking about his unfaithful people throughout the Scriptures, we never hear, “Well, fine! You were never really my people anyway. I never did love you.” Instead, we hear both the anguish and the jealous anger of a husband’s love that has been spurned by an adulterous wife. This is what we read about in Ezek 16:1-22:

Again the word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations, and say, Thus says the Lord GOD to Jerusalem: Your origin and your birth are of the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite.

And as for your birth, on the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born. "And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' I made you flourish like a plant of the field. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare. "When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine. Then I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil. I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you with fine leather. I wrapped you in fine linen and covered you with silk. And I adorned you with ornaments and put bracelets on your wrists and a chain on your neck. And I put a ring on your nose and earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour and honey and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord GOD. "But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby; your beauty became his. You took some of your garments and made for yourself colorful shrines, and on them played the whore. The like has never been, nor ever shall be. You also took your beautiful jewels of my gold and of my silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself images of men, and with them played the whore. And you took your embroidered garments to cover them, and set my oil and my incense before them. Also my bread that I gave you- I fed you with fine flour and oil and honey- you set before them for a pleasing aroma; and so it was, declares the Lord GOD. And you took your sons and your daughters, whom you had borne to me, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured. Were your whorings so small a matter that you slaughtered my children and delivered them up as an offering by fire to them? And in all your abominations and your whorings you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, wallowing in your blood.

Does this sound like a mere arrangement? Is this a bare contract? Is this merely some formal, external relationship? Even though his people were adulterous, God never says, "You were never *really* my wife anyway. I never *really* loved you. I never *really* gave myself to you." The heinousness of the adultery here is defined by the depth of the relationship that God has with his people. It is precisely because God has given himself to his people that their unfaithfulness is particularly putrid and punishable. God is the husband of Israel. Christ is the husband of the Church. These are not simply legal arrangements. To be a part of God's people is to be a member of the bride. It is to be married to God.

This is a relationship of love. It is a relationship in which God doesn't simply give us "gifts" that are somehow separate from him, but rather, God gives us himself. As he gives us himself—demonstrated climactically on the cross—his gifts are expressions of his own Person being given to us. Maybe the reason that we have such a problem understanding this (at times) is because of the way we give gifts. Whether tithes, offerings or even Christmas gifts, we may be

simply going through the obligatory motions because of our connections with certain people. And we may, in turn, project that notion upon God.

But God is not that way. When he gives gifts he is giving himself, not merely out of obligation because he is connected to us in some way, but because he loves his people. We, God's image-bearers, are to do this very same thing. This is what it means to love God with all our hearts, minds, soul and strength. Our gifts are not mere formalities and/or obligations because we are connected to God. They are expressions of our giving up of ourselves and all that we have and do to God.

Within this discussion of covenant that involves God's giving of himself should be a proper understanding of *grace*. Unwittingly, it seems, we have fallen into the trap of the medieval Roman Catholic Church when we seek to understand grace. The Roman Catholic Church before the Reformation began to view grace in a substantive or substantial way. That is, grace was something that could be infused as if it were an alien substance being pumped into the body. Sin was the thing that came along and poked a hole in the barrel and grace leaked out until it was stopped up by confession and penance. The priests of the medieval church were the ones who had their hands on the valves to dispense this substance of grace or withhold it when they wished.

This teaching concerning grace was flawed at its foundation. And when the foundation is flawed, everything built upon it is going to reflect the foundation. And so, the Reformers come along and seek to correct this formulation. For the most part they did. But there are still remnants in the Church of viewing the grace of God as a substance that God gives you that is somehow separate from him.

Clear from your mind the rubble of grace being a substance. It is not something that can be infused or imparted as if you are filling your gas tank with gasoline. God's grace is his favorable disposition. Certainly his gifts can be spoken of as his grace (as Paul speaks about his apostleship; cf. e.g., Rom 1:5). These gifts are expressions of God's favor. But grace is a relational term. It is not a thing, even though things manifest it. Grace is expressed in tangible ways, but it should not be thought of as something that God pipes into you.

This has much to do with how we understand the phrase means of grace. It must be clear what this does *not* mean. The means of grace are not pipes or spigots which carry grace in them any more than food actually carries life in it. That is, there is not this substance called "life" in food which is received substantively when you eat. This whole notion is wrong-headed.

The means of grace are the *contexts* in which God acts graciously toward his people. This is the place where God meets with his people, giving himself to them. It is a relationship. The water, the Word, the bread and wine are simply water, literature and food stuff outside of the context of God's gracious covenant. But in the context of God's covenant, the water, the Word, the bread and wine all become the places where God meets with this people, giving himself to them in love. It doesn't mean that any one of these things is magical. Far from it. These are simply the places where, in this relationship, God has ordained to meet with his people. It doesn't mean that the substances used go through some physical or metaphysical metamorphosis (e.g., transubstantiation). They remain physically the same stuff. That which separates them from their use in the rest of life is the Word of God. So while they are not magical, God does ordain certain things to accompany their use in his ordained contexts.

BAPTISM IS COVENANT INITIATION

It is within the context of all that is said earlier that we must view baptism and the

baptismal formula. Looking at what we call the Great Commission, we read: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ...” (Matt 28:19). A couple of things in this statement concerning our duty to baptize deserve our attention.

First, we need to understand what “the name” means. Is Jesus just speaking about a title attached to each member of the Godhead? Or is he speaking about something else? Several other uses of “name” in reference to God should be helpful in understanding that when Jesus speaks about “the name” he is speaking about God as Person, not a naked formula. Generally speaking, when God reveals his name or gives his name to his people, *he is acting to save them*. For instance, we read of God revealing his name to Abraham in Gen 17 as God Almighty. At that point God is (re)establishing his covenant with Abraham.

God reveals his name YHWH to Moses and delivers his people from Egypt (cf. Exod 3:14). This is how he says it in Exodus 6:2-8:

God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.’”

Pharaoh does not know the name of YHWH but soon learns it through the displays of his power (cf. Exod 5:2). David declares: “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God” (Ps 20:7). And again in Psalm 124:8 “Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Ps 124:8). It is “at the name of Jesus” that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (cf. Phil 2:9-11).

The name of YHWH or the name of Jesus does not speak simply about a title attached to them. It is the Person of YHWH and the Person of Jesus which is being spoken about. The name of Jesus is not some magic formula to be hurled out their like an abra-ka-dabra, hokus-pokus formula that scares all the demons away and fills your bank accounts magically. The name of Jesus is his Person. We find our help in the Person of our God. It is not simply the letters and syllables, but our God in whom we trust and who has chosen to be in relationship with us. So then, “the name” is the Person of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Secondly, we must turn our attention to what it means to be baptized “in” or “into” that name. It has been said that it is not the difficult words, phrases and passages that really give us the trouble in our study. When we come across those we retrieve the lexicons, the historical material, etc. in order to understand these things. The passages that give us fits are those things that we assume we understand. We already know what that means so we need not study it anymore. This phrase may be one of those passages for us. Because it is such a common practice of baptizing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it becomes one of those phrases that we need not examine. Everybody knows what that means. I am afraid that we have assumed too

much. Do we really understand what it means to be baptized “in” or better “into” the name?

When Peter stood at the Day of Pentecost and proclaimed, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ ..." (Acts 2:38), what were those people hearing? Were they hearing, “They have to recite some nice little words over me.” Or, were they hearing, “Be incorporated into Jesus Christ in baptism”? I believe the latter to be the case. Their baptism was to be their identification with the Messiah. Their baptism would say, “We are one with the Jesus the Messiah.” Being baptized *into* the name of Father, Son and Spirit is not a mere formula that we recite at the font. Christian baptism is the context in which God declares that the person being baptized has become part of him. That person has been engrafted into and is united with the Godhead.

This, of course, as we read earlier from the prophet Ezekiel, does not mean that the person will be faithful in that relationship. He may indeed be unfaithful and be “divorced,” as it were. But this person’s unfaithfulness does not make the word of God concerning him empty or vain. To the contrary. God’s word concerning the person remains true. But that word is a covenantal word. It is a real relationship of love that demands punishment for unfaithfulness to the relationship.

In baptism God declares something about the person being baptized. As we learn in Genesis 1, God’s word is powerful and creative. At the point of baptism God changes the relationship of a person with himself. However we understand the dynamics within that relationship, we still must understand them within that relationship.

Baptism is not what the person is saying about his relationship with God primarily. Baptism is what God is saying about his relationship with the person being baptized. And God says that the one being baptized is incorporated into a relationship with the entire Trinity. Again, this does not mean that baptism is magical any more than a wedding ceremony and the subsequent consummation is magical. These are covenant rites and ceremonies that are effective in bringing about what is promised by the rite.

For example, what is the difference between a man and woman having sexual relations the night before their wedding and having sexual relations the night of their wedding? Well, the night before it is sin before God and the night of the wedding it is a beautiful thing before God. What is the difference? The context of a wedding. I realize that in different cultures marriages are handled differently. But there is a basic dividing line between that which is appropriate and that which is inappropriate. This is certainly true within the Christian faith. The wedding ceremony with all of its rituals, vows, etc. in the presence of witnesses makes the difference between sinful sexual relations and God-honoring sexual relations. The ceremony is not magical. It is declarative. And these declarations change a person’s life completely. We would certainly believe that someone is straining to rationalize his sinful sexual relations if he were to say, “It’s o.k. We’re married on the inside.” We know that the public declaration changes everything.

So it is with ordination and such the like ceremonies. They are not magic but they are transformative. They change everything. When a person stands before a judge, the declaration/word of the judge will change everything about the man’s life. Baptism into the name of the Father, Son and Spirit changes everything, not magically but by God’s declaration (i.e., his word).

Being incorporated into the Godhead and each member in it, means that we participate in the activities that each member of the Godhead performs to establish, secure and maintain this covenant. This is not to say that each member’s activity and/or responsibility in this covenant can be separated from the others. Each member of the Godhead works in perfect agreement with the other.

From the beginning of redemption's story after the fall, God the Father made a promise that he would create for himself a people (and for his Son a bride). We see this clearly in God's dealings with Abraham. Through Abraham God would create a worldwide family. All the families of the earth would be blessed through the seed of Abraham. This promise given to Abraham Paul understands as the pouring out of the Spirit who is the one forming this family. As Paul says in Galatians 3:14 "... so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." In Acts 1, just before his ascension, Jesus speaks about the pouring out of the Spirit as the "promise of the Father." Luke records in Acts 1:4-5, "And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for *the promise of the Father*, which, he said, "you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." This promise is fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit is poured out upon the Church.

After this initial pouring out of the Spirit, Peter then associates the promise of the Spirit with baptism. Peter proclaims in Acts 2:38, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, *and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise* is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." The person who is baptized as a Christian after the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost (and the subsequent regions around the world, a discussion that continues through Acts), becomes an heir of the promise of the Father. The promise of the Father is forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Reformed Episcopal Bishop Ray Sutton says it this way, "Baptism is a sign and seal of something God does. What He does is promise forgiveness of sins through Christ. In Baptism a person becomes united with this promise. Even if a person turns out to be a false believer like Simon [Magus], he still has the promise of God on him. If a baptized person meets this promise in unbelief, it is to his own condemnation. The promise obligates a person to believe, but the baptized individual may or may not believe initially or in perpetuity. Either someone might profess faith before baptism and then fall away, or someone might grow into the faith obligated by the promise."⁴

A person baptized into the name of the Father becomes an heir of the promise of the Father. But the promise of the Father cannot be understood apart from Jesus Christ. Therefore, we are baptized into the name of the Son also. Jesus is the mediator of the covenant. He is the one through whom we have access to the Father. There is no relationship with the Father apart from the Son. When it is said that we are baptized into the name of the Son, it means that we are incorporated into the Son. To be heir of the Father's promise means that you are Abraham's seed. This is how Paul describes this once again in Galatians 3:16, "Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, "And to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "And to your Seed," who is Christ.... Galatians 3:27-29 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you *are* Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

One of the hindrances for us understanding union with Christ is that we understand it in a *purely* invisible or mystical sense. But that is not the way the New Testament presents it. To be incorporated into Christ is to be a part of his body, the church. The church is the bride of Christ, bone of his bones, flesh of his flesh as Paul says in Eph 5:25ff. This is a great mystery. Reading

⁴Ray Sutton, Signed, Sealed, Delivered, 84-85.

that the church is the body of Christ is sometimes relegated to a mere illustration. But again, this is descriptive of the covenant. This is the nature of Christ's relationship with his body. When Saul of Tarsus was confronted by the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, he asks, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?" (cf. Acts 9:4). Jesus is one with his very physical historical church. Sometimes union with Christ in his body, the church, is given mere lip service as external and not the *real* union. It is as if the church and membership in it is like the Kiwanis or Lion's Clubs. Union with the church is never presented in the Scriptures as this mere superficial, organizational structure. It is living, dynamic, relational. Unless we are willing to reduce God's covenant to a mere superficial arrangement, then we must understand that baptism into the name of the Son and being included in Jesus' church is union with Christ. John Calvin rightly notes: "Baptism is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children."⁵ Again, this is not a magical ceremony. It is a covenant ritual which actually does what God says it does: we are joined to Christ.

Being joined to the Father and to the Son cannot be separated from being joined to the Spirit. It is the nature of the Trinitarian relationship. I will discuss this relationship more at length below when I deal with the popular notion of separation between Spirit baptism and water baptism. But it will suffice to say that being baptized into the name of the Spirit means that we participate in the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out on the church on the day of Pentecost. Peter did not proclaim, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and you *may receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" Peter said with unwavering certainty that "you *will* receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." And he was saying that this occurs in the context of the waters of baptism. That certainly must be affirmed. Now, if we cannot speak like Peter speaks there, maybe it is our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church that needs to be adjusted. The apostles inspired words do not need adjusting. Those who participate in the body of Christ, the church, are participants in the work of the Holy Spirit. How the Holy Spirit works in each individual within the church is mysterious and *unknowable* to us in its particulars. But his work within the church and the members in it cannot be denied.

To be baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Spirit is not a mere formalism or a bland external ceremony. Covenant ceremonies change everything. This does not mean that some substance of grace is pumped into you at baptism. It means that your relationship with the Godhead changes. You were not in covenant with God and now God has declared that you are in covenant with him. Your relationships have changed, not because of what you felt or did not feel at your baptism, but because of what God said about you. While we may wonder about the mysterious aspects of that relationship with the individuals within it, of this much we can be sure: what God declares about you and me is true. And that truth demands our loving loyalty throughout all of our days.

SPIRIT V. WATER BAPTISM?

There is a theological notion that has become somewhat popular today concerning the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the waters of baptism. This notion is that there is great divide between water baptism and the baptism of the Spirit. One is "real" baptism—invisible, "spiritual" baptism—while the other is only an external picture but is not the means by which God

⁵Institutes, 4.15.1.

actually applies anything to the person being baptized (that is, in any “real” or “spiritual” sense). The sharp distinction between the water and the Spirit and the texts used to support this assertion seem to me to be a relatively new development in the Church over the past century and a half. Nowadays in the evangelical church people who don’t see this sharp distinction are pejoratively labeled as sacerdotalists. (Of course, not many people even know what that means. It just sounds really bad, and Roman Catholics are sacerdotalists. But the definition of sacerdotalism is really not settled. In the view of B.B. Warfield, the late Reformed Princeton theologian, a sacerdotalist is anyone who believes that God uses means to accomplish his salvation. That is, if you don’t believe that God always and only works *immediately* upon the soul, then you are a sacerdotalist. At the other end of the spectrum, sacerdotalism may imply a system in which priests have magical powers conveyed to them at ordination so that they can administer the sacraments that will infuse grace into the recipients. So, depending on who you talk to, you might be a sacerdotalist!) The discussion needs to go beyond muddled and pejorative name-calling and guilt-by-association-of-particular-words-and-phrases to the substance. And the substance can only be found by good exegesis of the Scriptures.

One of the problems that I have seen in the recent discussions about covenant, baptism, etc. is the usage of terms. Biblical words and phrases are extracted from their context and given theological definitions that cannot be justified by the text. Now, it must be said that there is no problem in developing coherent biblical doctrines (i.e., systematizing). For example, it is right and proper that we should have a biblical doctrine of the Trinity. The three-in-oneness of God is taught by the Scriptures. The Church has given this the name “the Trinity.” No problem. The problem would come if we developed and taught that the three-in-oneness of God should be labeled “grace.” (I use hyperbole to make the point.) The definition would not be true to the way the Scriptures use the term. Thus, that would cause confusion. God’s grace would take on an entirely different meaning that would have little to do with the way the inspired authors wrote.

So it is, I contend, with the phrase and concepts of “Spirit baptism” or “S/spiritual baptism.” These words and phrases have been made to mean by many, “The invisible work of the Spirit by which he creates and sustains saving faith so that the person will certainly persevere to the end.” The Bible does teach the concept that the Spirit works this way, but that is not what Spirit baptism or spiritual baptism means in the Scriptures. If you want to call that “effectual calling” then call it effectual calling. But DON’T call it Spirit baptism because that confuses the exegesis of the Scriptures. It does this so much that when we take that definition and go back to the text with it, all sorts of things become muddled. Straight talk about baptism *cannot* mean water baptism. It must mean real baptism (i.e., invisible and what God does without means). We know it cannot mean water because God can’t do that through water else our entire theological world is shaken up. Why, if God used water to accomplish these things, that would be ... sacerdotalism. The problems come back to the texts themselves. For example, what did Paul mean when he spoke about every member of the Church in Corinth being baptized by/in the same Spirit? What did Paul mean that we are baptized into Christ in Romans 6:3? What did Paul mean when he said that as many as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ in Gal 3:27? What did Paul mean when he said that there is one baptism in Eph 4:5?

One thing that was hammered into me in my exegesis classes in seminary was that you must always understand the context. Context determines meaning. You do not have the right to impose upon the text something that cannot be supported by the context. You must also put yourself, as best you can from textual and contextual studies, in the place of the audience as well. What did they hear when this text was read to them? This is what we must do in the cases of the texts that I want us to examine. So, as best we can, we must shed as much of our modern

thinking as possible and go back and breathe the air of the first century church.

There are several key texts that are important to this discussion that are normally used to assert the differences between “spiritual baptism” and “water baptism.” I want to examine these texts to see if they can bear the exegesis of those who used them to speak about an invisible baptism.

ACTS - FROM EXTRAORDINARY TO ORDINARY

The book of Acts is the record of what Jesus was doing by his Spirit in the world in the first century of the reign of our Lord. Acts explains the transition time between the old and new covenants (as does most of the NT). For Acts to be interpreted and applied properly today, we must approach it within this context. It is normally said that the historical happenings in the book of Acts are not *normative* for the continuing church through the ages. This simply means that we should not expect the same, exact type of occurrences to continue on in the church, world without end. This is how many of us in the Reformed branch of the church approach the issue of tongues in Acts. Tongues, as it was in the first century, was a revelatory gift and the effective prophecy against Israel that they would be judged by God for their disobedience (cf. Isa 28:11-12; 1Cor 14:21; cf. also Acts 2). But tongues had two sides. They were the sign of judgment upon Israel, but they were also the sign of the promise of the world/humanity being reunited in fulfillment of God’s promise and the reversal of Babel. Being a revelatory gift, tongues ceased with the death of the apostles, their writings, and the church being established. So, when we go back to Acts and read it, we must read it within its historical context when we deal with the issue of tongues or anything else in the book for that matter. Scripture can *never* be read outside of its historical context.

This has a great deal to do with how we approach the question at hand concerning Spirit and water baptism(s). Because the distinction is made between the two in the clearest fashion in the book of Acts. In fact, this is how the book of Acts begins. Jesus is about to ascend back to heaven to be enthroned to rule the world. At this time he refers back to something that was said by John the Baptizer recorded in Matthew 3:11, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (cf. par. in Mk 1:8; Lk 3:16; Jn 1:33). Jesus tells his disciples that this is what is about to happen. They are about to be baptized in/by/with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). This is what happens on the day of Pentecost. When the day of Pentecost had fully come, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon those gathered waiting for the promise and tongues of fire appeared above their heads (cf. 2:1-4). After Peter preaches to the crowd and they desire to follow Christ, he tells them to repent and be baptized (2:38). So clearly here the baptism of the Spirit and the baptism by water are two separate events.

The case for the separation is made even stronger as we move through the book of Acts. Philip is in Samaria preaching. Amazing things are happening. But the people had not yet received the Holy Spirit. In fact, it is said like this:

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, ***but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus***. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-17)

Again, there is here another clear distinction between the giving of the Spirit and being baptized

(by water) into the name of Jesus.

But it continues. We come now to the house of Cornelius, a Roman soldier who lived in Caesarea. Through some revelations to Peter that told him that the Gentiles were to be included in God's family without becoming Jews, Peter goes to Cornelius's house. Before Peter can finish preaching the Holy Spirit falls on all those who hear the word. Only after this does Peter say, "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Cf. Acts 10)

We see this one more time in Acts when Paul meets the Ephesian disciples. Paul asks them if they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed. They responded that they had not even heard that there was a Holy Spirit. Paul then asks them about their baptism: "Into what then were you baptized?" They responded that they were baptized into John's baptism. Paul told them that the one of whom John told people to believe had come, these disciples were baptized in the name of Jesus. *Then* Paul lays hands on them and they receive the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 19:1-7).

Clearly Acts portrays the giving of the Holy Spirit as something distinct from water baptism, right? Yes. But this must be understood in its historical context and its relationship with what will continue in the church from that time forward. At least two things have to be taken into account when looking at the book of Acts and the Spirit and water baptism issue:

(1) *The eschatological fulfillment of the promise of the new age/new creation.*

That which begins this entire discussion in Acts is the statement initially made by John the Baptizer which I quoted earlier. John baptizes with water unto/into repentance. Jesus will baptize in/with/by the Holy Spirit. The background or context behind these two statements in regard to the movement of history must be understood if these statements are to be comprehended properly. John is the last of the Old Covenant prophets. He is the one of whom it is prophesied, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord'" (cf. Isa 40:3; Mal 3:1; Matt 3:3). John is the one who will point and prepare the way for the Messiah to come and fulfill the promises given by God to the fathers. That promise is the promise of pouring out his Spirit upon all flesh (cf. Joel 2:28-29). The coming of the Spirit in this particular way will be the indication that God's new age has been inaugurated. And this is, in fact, what Peter preaches on the Day of Pentecost. His text is taken from Joel 2.

The baptism or pouring out of the Spirit is not so much about individuals as individuals and their private spiritual experiences, but individuals as part of this eschatological fulfillment and those joined to him. That which is going on in the book of Acts is the establishment of this new creation, the church, the Spirit-filled body of Christ, throughout the regions of the world.

Acts 1:8 gives us a rough outline of the movement of the entire book. The work of Christ and his Spirit begin in Jerusalem, move through Judea (the place in which Jerusalem is located), Samaria (remember Philip), and then to the uttermost parts of the earth ("the nations"; the Gentile nations; remember the Ephesians). At each stage of this development we see this outpouring of the Spirit which establishes the work in that region. This is done as the apostles take the keys of the kingdom and unlock the doors at each point by the laying on of their hands. The apostles must authorize the work of God as the gospel spreads. The Spirit being given is the effectual sign that Jesus has been enthroned and is establishing his new creation in all the world.

(2) *Water baptism is associated with this new creation work.*

Taken in absolute terms, the words of John would seem to exclude water baptism all together. John baptizes with water, but Jesus will baptize with the Spirit. But this is not what we find. Jesus associates the discipling of the nations with the baptism of water in Matt 28:19. Peter also, immediately after they are baptized in the Holy Spirit, tells the people listening that they must repent and be baptized so that they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Christian baptism (i.e., by water) is not antithetical to or even in the most positive way disassociated from the baptism of the Spirit. The two are closely connected in the *ordinary* operations of the Spirit in the continuing life of the church.

What occurs in the book of Acts is a movement from the extraordinary work of the Spirit to the ordinary work of the Spirit. I believe that this can be seen clearly even as early as the Day of Pentecost. The apostles and those gathered with them waited for the promise of the coming of the Spirit. The Spirit was poured out upon them in an extraordinary way. But, immediately after this Peter tells the people that they must repent and be baptized and they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Why does he not tell them, “You must go into a room and wait until the promise comes upon you”? Because Christ had already poured out his Spirit in Jerusalem upon the Church. Now, what they had to do was to enter this new age. And you enter that through turning and being baptized, brought into the people of God in Christ.

An example which, I believe, illustrates this movement from the extraordinary to the ordinary is marriage (again). More specifically, this would be the marriage of Adam and Eve in the garden compared to all subsequent marriages. What happened in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve was, no doubt, a unique and extraordinary event. In order to accomplish the first marriage God has to put Adam to sleep, perform surgery and create a woman. Adam proclaims that this woman is now “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” The question is now, Is this true about each subsequent marriage from then on? Well, Moses says that the marriage of Adam and Eve provides the understanding of why a man must leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the fact that the two become *one flesh*. Is your wife still bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh? Yes. But God did not have to do what he did with the first man and woman. From that point on he joins a man and a woman in marriage through covenant ceremony.

So it is with Spirit baptism and water baptism. The Spirit baptisms spoken of in Acts are unique and unrepeatable events (in their transitional, historical contexts). But everyone baptized into the church from that point to this enters into that baptism by the Holy Spirit in the first century. When we are baptized into the name of the Spirit, we enter into relationship with the Spirit.

One problem that skews our understanding of Spirit baptism in the modern evangelical church is the fact that we tend to view things the wrong way around. We turn the binoculars backwards and look at things from the point of view of an individual experience rather than viewing things from the perspective of the church. Spirit baptism, then, becomes my private, internal experience with God. But that is not what is going on in the Scriptures with Spirit baptism. The Spirit is what God pours out on *the church*. Those who participate in the church are participants in the Spirit given to the church. Those who have entered the Church have entered God’s new creation. They participate in that new creation, that new covenant. What God the Spirit does in each individual heart he knows. But even those who outrage the Spirit of grace (cf. Heb 10:29) participate in his work *because* they participate in the church.

While the book of Acts portrays the baptism of the Spirit and water baptism as distinct in this extraordinary time, in the continuing church water baptism becomes the ordinary means by which we participate in that baptism of the Spirit given to the church in the first century.

1CORINTHIANS 12:13 - BAPTIZED IN/WITH/BY THE SPIRIT INTO ONE BODY

In order to understand what is being said by Paul in chapter 12, we must get the setting of the entire letter to some degree. The audience to which Paul is writing is the church which in Corinth, established by Paul on his second missionary journey (cf. Acts 18:1ff.). One major problem in Corinth was their divisions, their factions in the church around particular personalities. Paul tells the Corinthians that he has received reports that there are divisions among the brothers there. Some are saying, "I am of Paul," others are saying, "I am of Apollos," and still others are saying, "I am of Cephas," and the real spiritual ones are saying, "I am of Christ" (cf. 1:10-12). Appalled by this, Paul asks, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1:13) Paul is thankful that he did not baptize many of them. This is said, not because Paul believes baptism to be unimportant, but precisely because it was of such importance. Let me explain.

The problem in Corinth is sectarianism and personality cults. If Paul had baptized these people, there was a great danger that they would have considered themselves as "of Paul." It is precisely because baptism is important and forms the community of believers, the church, in a way that preaching does not that Paul is thankful that he baptized only a few. People can here someone preach and not be a disciple. But you cannot be baptized and not be a disciple. Baptism means you are a part of the group, so to speak. I believe that this is made clear when Paul appeals to their baptism into Christ just a sentence before. He reminds them that they were not baptized into anyone else but Christ, and Christ is not divided.

The appeal to their baptism into Christ is an appeal for their unity as the body of Christ. They are to act in a way that is consistent with what their baptism means. And so, after dealing with a number of important issues in the first eleven chapters, Paul comes once again to the issue of unity and the basis for it in our present text, 1Corinthians 12:12-13: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free- and all were made to drink of one Spirit."

On the basis of the fact that all of these people have been baptized in one Spirit into one body and made to drink of one Spirit, they are now to live out the unity that they have as the body of Christ. But the question comes, is Paul referring to an internal and/or secret baptism which no one can see or know about in others until the consummation of the age or is he referring to water baptism? Understanding the issues that Paul is dealing with here in the church of Corinth, Paul must be dealing with something that people can know without a doubt. He is dealing with people who are acting factious ways, and he is telling them why they shouldn't be doing this. Paul is addressing the church in Corinth. He is addressing people that can be seen. He is addressing people with sin problems and some of whom are at the least contemplating denying the resurrection of the dead (cf. 1Cor 15). Why should these people not be acting this way? Why should they strive to live in unity with one another? Paul says it is because they were all baptized in one Spirit into one body.

To take this "all" here as somehow qualified as those who really know what I am talking about, those who have really experienced this, does violence to the text of Scripture and could be reduced to meaninglessness. If you are to be unified only with those who have been baptized in the Spirit in the sense of the secret operations of the Spirit, how would you ever know with whom you are to strive for unity? What if some of the people with whom you are striving to be unified turn out to be apostates? How can you know who has been really baptized by the Spirit? Paul's letters are turned inside out sometimes trying to maintain a theological vocabulary that

does not fit the exegesis of Scripture!

The answer to this dilemma is, You are to strive for unity with all those who have been baptized because you have all been baptized by one Spirit into one body. Later in this discourse Paul will say, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1Cor 12:27). Who is this “you” (plural should be translated “y’all”)? The people Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians 1:2: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” These who have been fighting with one another and separating following various personalities. These are the ones that are the body of Christ and individually members of it. These sinful people are the ones who have experienced the baptism of the Spirit. How can Paul know that they have been baptized in/by one Spirit into one body? Because they belong to the church. The church is where the Spirit is and where people participate in the Spirit’s work. To be baptized in water into the body of Christ, the church, is to be “Spirit baptized.”

There is no veiled reference to the gnostic secret society within the church who were really Spirit baptized while these others were simply water baptized. Their participation in the Spirit through baptism is the basis for Paul’s exhortation to be unified with one another. Certainly Paul knew that there might be and probably were some in Corinth who would apostatize. Some were even on the brink according to 1 Corinthians 5 and the immoral man there. But he does not back off from saying that they *all* were baptized in one Spirit. If our theology and/or theological terminology cannot account for the Spirit’s activity in every member of the Church, then it is our theology and/or theological terminology that must be changed, not the Scriptures.

To be a part of the people of God and participate in the work of the Spirit is both a privilege and a responsibility, as Paul is making quite clear here. It is a privilege because God has counted you among his people and has entered into covenant with you. It is here that God meets with you. It is here that is the place of blessing. But this relationship also places demands upon your life. The demand is that you continue to cling to God’s word. This relationship demands faith/faithfulness.

To say that we are all baptized by the Spirit, in biblical language, is *not* to say the person is guaranteed final salvation. To be joined to Christ in baptism does *not* mean a person is going to persevere to the end. It does mean that *all* the promises in Christ are offered to him because he is joined to the one to whom all the promises have been given. But in order to obtain those promises he must cling to Christ in faith. He must walk by faith. Faith itself is a gift of God. And God is working all of his secret operations out within these contexts.

Just before I leave this passage, it is a little more than interesting to note that our the Westminster Confession in 28.1, when referring to water baptism that brings a person into the visible church, uses 1 Corinthians 12:13 as a proof-text for that. The Westminster Divines obviously saw no tension between believing this to be water baptism and the other things taught in the Confession. While the proof-texts are not binding upon us in our vows, we do gain some insight into the way that the Divines were thinking. And they clearly saw 1 Corinthians 12:13 as a reference to water baptism.

The sad irony about much of this debate is the division over baptism. If that creates no irony for us, then it is we who have not understood our baptism. Paul appeals to baptism as the basis of our unity in Christ. We shouldn’t be divided because we have all been baptized by one Spirit into one body. But the very thing that marks our unity has become in many parts of the church the very thing that marks our disunity.

EPHESIANS 4:5 - ONE BAPTISM

In order to understand one particular passage in any book with its original significance, you must understand the context of the book itself. It simply will not do to treat the Scriptures as if they are a buffet with verses being the courses of a meal that can be extracted from the text and examined as if they stand alone. Context determines meaning. A text without a context is a pretext. Anytime the Scriptures are read as simply a collection of independent verses, you will run into this problem.

Unlike the Corinthian church which we discussed above, the Ephesian church seems to have relatively few difficulties. If they do have difficulties they must not be so blatantly obvious as were the problems in Corinth. Paul does not address any specific problems concerning the Ephesians. But the theme of the letter may imply that there were some undercurrents of division that needed to be dealt with before they turned into a tidal wave.

The fundamental theme of Ephesians is God's new humanity created in Christ Jesus. That is, God has chosen a people for himself whom he has redeemed from slavery. It is to these people that his promises are given, and it is through these people that God's wonderful work in the world will be accomplished. This new humanity is made up of people from every type of ethnic and social background. In Christ they are all made one new man. Paul purposely employs the language familiar to the Jews from the Old Testament concerning God's choosing a people and entering into covenant with them; his redeeming a people through blood sacrifice, thus freeing them from slavery; and his granting them his presence in the Person of the Spirit who will lead them to their promised inheritance. This is nothing less than exodus language.

Employing this language and applying it to the church in Christ Jesus tells us something about the way Paul understood what God did in and through Jesus. Since the fall God was about the business of forming a new humanity who would image God and thus fulfill the mandate given to the original man. Israel was to be that new humanity. They were a people chosen by God for the task of being a light to the nations (Deut 4:6-8; 7:6ff.; cf. also Isa 49:6). They were to bring all of the world to God's holy mountain to be worshipers of him. But Israel as a nation failed in her task to be God's true image-bearer. But Jesus as the faithful child of Abraham and king of Israel fulfilled Israel's task. He suffered his people's fate and brought them into freedom through his suffering. Jesus is the true Israel. All those in union with him are a part of that holy nation. In this way the church of Jesus Christ is God's new humanity.

Paul prays for them at the end of chapter one that they will understand that to which they have been called and the power of God at work in and through the church. This is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

In 2:1-10 Paul reminds them of the grace of God granted to them when they were dead in trespasses and sins. He has made them alive together with Christ and seated them with Christ in the heavenlies. Paul reminds them at the end of that section that they are God's workmanship *created* in Christ Jesus unto good works. They are the new creation of God as the church of Jesus Christ. The outworking of this is then seen in Paul's discussion that follows concerning the fact that Jews and Gentiles have been made one in Christ (cf. 2:11 ff.). The Gentiles are reminded that they were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But all of this has been remedied through Christ who is our peace. He has broken down the walls that divided Jews and Gentiles making peace through the blood of his cross. Now, because of Christ, the Gentiles are no longer strangers and aliens but fellow-citizens and members of the household of God.

The nature of this union of the Gentiles and Jews was a mystery in past ages. This is how Paul describes it in chapter three. Now it is revealed. Paul is a minister of this gospel that teaches reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles, the fulfillment of God's promise to make one worldwide family. This God has done in the church. The church in Christ Jesus is this one people of God. And it is through the church that God reveals his manifold wisdom to the rulers and authorities, the principalities and powers, in the heavenlies.

After praying for the church at the end of chapter three, Paul begins to press home to the Ephesians how this unity is lived out. Chapter four begins with the exhortation: "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph. 4:1). What is that calling or vocation (as per AV) Paul refers to here? It is the vocation to be God's new humanity, to bear the divine image as the new creation in Christ Jesus.

With all the emphasis on the "oneness" of the people of God in Christ Jesus (i.e., the church) throughout the opening passages of this letter, the exhortation now comes to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." In classic Pauline fashion, Paul is telling the people, "Act like who you are. You are one in Christ Jesus, now live that out with the guy sitting next to you. This is how you will walk worthy of the calling with which you have been called." Paul then goes back to the foundation once again when he says, "There is one body and one Spirit- just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). I will come back to this of course, but from here Paul discusses how this one body, this one new man, operates. Various gifts are used within the body to bring the body to its maturity (4:7-16). Now, because these Christians have a new identity in Christ as the people of God, they are no longer to walk as the "Gentiles" do. Their lives are to be consciously lived in submission to God, putting off those old ways (i.e., the old man with all associated with it; the "in Adam" solidarity) and putting on the new ways (i.e., the new man with all that is associated with it; the "in Christ" solidarity).

This new creation life is then shown to be a walk in love towards one another (5:1ff.), which manifests itself in the re-created relations between husband and wife (5:22ff.), children and parents (6:1-4) and masters and slaves (6:5ff.).

The closing exhortations concern the Ephesians being strong so that they may fight the war that is being engaged in the heavenlies (where Christ is already enthroned above all principalities and powers and is the head of all things in the church; 1:20-23. This is also where they are presently seated; 2:6). Within the context of this book, it is through the church, this one worldwide family, that God will display his wisdom to the principalities and powers. So it is the church that must prepare for battle as the principalities and powers do not give up easily (cf. 6:10ff.).

I hope with this brief overview of the letter that you can see that Paul's main concern for the church in Ephesus is their living out their oneness (i.e., unity) as the church, the new creation of God in Christ, in the world. Tucked away within this larger context is two words that concern us: "one baptism." As I said, they cannot be understood apart from their larger context, so we must keep them there.

Why must the Ephesians be unified? Because there is one body (i.e., the church), one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God. The first order of business that needs to be taken care of is Paul's view of the church in this (as well as other passages). Paul does not see a "church within a church," a body within a body. There is "one body." Whatever that one body is, there is only one.

What is that "one body"? It is the church. It consists of these people to whom Paul is writing, these people who must live out their oneness as the new people of God. It consists of

these people who must no longer define themselves in terms of ethnicity but in terms of Christ.

They must also live in unity because there is not only one body but one baptism. Here is the question: Is this referring to a secret, invisible baptism, or is it referring to the water baptism that is common to all who are a part of the church?

Various interpretations have arisen around this “one baptism” statement that relate to the invisible baptism interpretation. Some say that this one baptism is the baptism of Jesus in death (not his water baptism). Baptism is the way in which Jesus refers to his death in Luke 12:50: [“I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!”] In this case, Paul’s statement is speaking about Christ’s work on the cross. Others have seen this as the Spirit’s baptism of the church. That is, this is what was promised by the Father and fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost. Still others have said that this refers to water baptism. This is the covenant rite that joins a person with the people of God.

At least three events are described as baptism in the New Testament. Do you think that the apostle Paul is aware that these various events are baptisms, all relating to the Christian church? How could he then say that there is only one baptism? Would the real baptism please stand up! If there is only one baptism in this sense (either Christ’s *or* the Spirit’s *or* water), which ones are really not needed? If there is only one real baptism, the others are made redundant and superfluous. Running a *reductio* on this line of thinking would cause water baptism to be viewed as nothing more than an empty religious ritual. The “real” baptism is the only one that *really* counts because this is *the* one. What in the world then is Jesus doing commanding an empty religious ritual?

The problem is not Paul’s understanding but ours. We have separated what God has joined together because *we know* that water baptism can’t mean that. But the fact is, all of these various baptisms—Jesus’ own water baptism, his death, the pouring out of the Spirit—are all unified as the plan of God is unified. Through the waters of baptism you are identified with Jesus, having been baptized into his name (Mt 28:19) you become identified with his death (Rom 6:3ff.; more on this in the next section). Through the waters of baptism you are identified with the Spirit, having been baptized into his name (Mt 28:19) you become identified with his work at Pentecost (cf. Acts 2; 1Cor 12:13). You enter this *one* covenant and *one* people of God through *one* baptism. That baptism is God’s ordained means of signifying and sealing your union with the Godhead, and, thus, the church.

As I brought out when I dealt with 1Cor 12:13, and what should be obvious from the context of Ephesians, Paul is appealing to the Ephesians to live in unity with one another based upon the fact that there is *one baptism* (among other things of course). How could the popular notion of “Spirit baptism” (invisible baptism) be an appeal for unity? How do you know who has been “Spirit baptized” in that sense so that you might be unified with them? People are always suspect.

The hermeneutical and theological gymnastics that must be engaged in to see this “one baptism” as something other than water baptism stretch all reasonable boundaries. One’s commitments to a predetermined position are the only explanation for how a person could disassociate this from water baptism. The most natural and contextual way to read this passage is that the one baptism is that one baptism in water that is the sign of inclusion among the people of God in Christ.

ROMANS 6:3-4 - BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST’S DEATH

Romans is one of Paul’s longer letters. Its theology is massive and its reasoning is

intricate, well-balanced and tight. The situation of Romans is different from his other letters in at least this one respect: Paul has never been to Rome. He did not found the church of Rome, but he has certainly heard about it. Having covered the eastern half of the Empire, Paul sets his gaze toward the west. Antioch was his base of operations in the east. He desires the Rome will be his base of operations for his westward moving mission. He writes this letter as somewhat of an appeal to make Rome his base of operations and, thus, to introduce himself.

Rome has a set of problems all her own. But wonder of wonders, they are not much different than what Paul faced in other places. The Jews and the Gentiles need to understand they are one people who need to act like it. Paul begins and ends his letter with this theme of Jews and Gentiles being united. He is a debtor to all men, and the gospel he preaches is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. The main body of the letter ends in chapter 15 with Paul reciting the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the bringing in of the Gentiles. He sees his ministry as a part of the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Between the first part of the letter and the last part of the letter, Paul explains how this has all come about; that is, how God has created this new family. He also explains that the creation of this new family is not *contrary* to God's promises but rather the *fulfillment* of those promises. This is, in fact, what Paul means by the statement in 1:17 speaking about the righteousness of God being revealed from faith to faith. The righteousness of God is God's covenant faithfulness. Paul's aim is to show that God has been faithful to his promises and Paul himself and his ministry are a part of the fulfillment of those promises.

It should not be surprising that the way in which Paul discusses God's acting in covenant faithfulness follows history. The underlying and controlling narrative of God's activity in redeeming his people and, through his people, the world is what shapes Paul's discussion. Paul begins in 1:18ff. emphasizing creation and the Gentile world. This is pre-Jew, if you will (and still characterizes the pagan nations). Adam, his fall and the consequences of this are laid out in this opening section. Sin has entered the world and its effects are horrendous. People are in a desperate situation. Even among this world that lies in virtual darkness not possessing the law by nature (the Gentiles don't have Torah) there are people doing those things which are contained in the law. These people will be vindicated by God. They will be justified (cf. 2:1-17).

Generally, the world is unfaithful and in darkness. So God chooses Abraham, the father of the Jews. The Jews are God's people. They are called to bring God's light to the world. This is what God promised Abraham. But the Jews have themselves turned out to be unfaithful. Because of this unfaithfulness, they will be condemned by the very law they say they keep (2:17ff.). This provokes all kinds of questions about God's faithfulness. If the Jews have been unfaithful, how are God's promises going to be fulfilled (i.e., since God has promised to work through Abraham's seed)? Does Israel's unfaithfulness nullify the faithfulness of God? MAY IT NEVER BE! Let God be true and every man a liar (cf. 3:1ff.)! God will be faithful to his promises. But how? Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. Where is the hope for God's promises to be fulfilled? The answer is found in Jesus. God's promises will be fulfilled through the faithfulness of Jesus, the King of the Jews, Abraham's seed and son of David (cf. 1:3; 3:21ff.). Jesus has come as the Jewish Messiah to reveal God's righteousness, his covenant faithfulness.

Is this salvation for the Jews alone? Is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of the Gentiles? Yes, he is the God of the Gentiles. Since there is one God who is the Creator and Redeemer of the world, God must be the God of the Jews and Gentiles. So how are God's people marked out in the world now? If the Jews are not exclusively God's people, how are God's

people to be recognized in the world? The people of God will be marked out by their allegiance⁶ to Jesus.

Paul's discussion of Abraham in chapter four is then an exposition of the promises given to Abraham that he would be heir of the world (e.g., 4:13). Abraham would have a family that would not simply be made up of one small ethnic group. He would be the father of all who believe, who walk in the same way that Abraham walked; that is, by faith.

Chapter five begins a new section in Romans in which Paul is going to tell the story of redemption as realized in Jesus. Paul has closed out the end of the first major section by saying that Jesus was delivered up (i.e., crucified) for our offenses and raised for our justification or vindication. Now, those who are characterized by faith in Jesus participate in that vindication before the Father. We are the true people of God who have peace with God because we are in union with the Messiah. Then the story begins again in earnest when Paul begins to compare and contrast Adam and Christ. To be in Adam (i.e., to be identified or in union with him) is death. To be in Christ (i.e., identified with him; a part of the Christ people) is life.

Paul picks up and uses the exodus theme (or the new exodus theme) in chapters six, seven and eight. The people of God pass through the waters having participated in the Passover (chap. 6). In chapter seven we see the giving of the law at Sinai and the debacle that happens with the golden calf. Israel, God's new Adam falls once again.⁷ Chapter eight is the deliverance of the people of God through Christ by Christ doing what the law could not do because it was weak through the flesh. These people are now the new wilderness wandering people who are being "led by the Spirit of God" as their pillar of cloud and fire. In short, they have passed through the sea being delivered. They have received the Torah and found that it could not give what it had promised. But Jesus has now done what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh. Now God's people are marching toward their promised land.

Couched within this dense retelling of God's story of redemption in terms of its fulfillment in Jesus we find the text that concerns us: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (6:3-4). In this passage Paul is answering the question about serving sin. This must be understood with all the rich historical overtones that it possesses. Chapter six in particular has several themes that put this right in the flow of redemptive historical thought. We have a slave master, a Pharaoh: sin. We have a death and passing through the waters: Passover and exodus. We have slavery contrasted with freedom: in Egypt as opposed to being delivered from Egypt. We even have the overtones of people

⁶"Allegiance" seems to be a more "filled out" understanding of *πίστις*. It encompasses many of the nuances of the word which are not readily comprehended by our word *faith*. Of course, I am perfectly happy with the word *faith* if it is kept within its biblical context. *Allegiance* carries the political as well as the theological resonances that would have been apparent when someone confessed "Jesus is Lord."

⁷I realize that much debate has occurred over the meaning of Paul in chapter seven of Romans. You may read of all the various interpretations in Murray, *NICNT: The Epistle to the Romans*; Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*; Stott, *Romans* or even Fitzmeyer, *The Anchor Bible: Romans* vol. 33. But in all thy reading, thou shouldst read Wright, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10. Though Wright does not draw out all of the implications of Romans 7, he does have some good insight as to the macro structure of the text, which, I believe, is quite useful in all of the individual applications that we can make of it.

wondering whether or not they should return to the slave-master.⁸ It is within this setting that we should understand Paul's reference to baptism into Christ.

The passage runs something like this: Paul asks the question, based upon what he has said at the end of chapter five, "Shall we go on abiding in sin that grace may abound?" This is usually taken to mean, "continue on our sinning practices." But that is not Paul's primary meaning here (although it certainly includes it). Paul is speaking about where Christians stand in relationship to Adam/sin/slavery/Pharaoh/law or Christ/righteousness/freedom/grace. That is, What group are you identified with as Christians? With whom are you in union? Paul says that we cannot abide or remain in solidarity with sin *because we have died with Christ in baptism*. In fact, as many commentators point out, the reality of this baptism is common knowledge (or at least is assumed to be) among Christians. Paul asks, "Do you not know?.." implying that this is common knowledge. He is assuming that they do know this, and he is appealing to their knowledge of it as the basis for his exhortation which will come in 6:11-13.

There are at least three indicators here that Paul is speaking of water baptism:

(1) *The exodus theme.*

Elsewhere in Paul's writings, water baptism is said to be the New Covenant equivalent of the people passing through the Sea in the Exodus. They are being set free from the tyranny of Pharaoh/Egypt and on their way to the promised inheritance (cf. 1Cor 10:1ff.). There in 1Cor. 10 Paul bases his exhortations to proper behavior within the Corinthian church upon this baptism (and participation in the Eucharist). Paul is doing the same thing here. Water baptism is the effective sign that a person has joined the new exodus. This person is a part of the historical outworking of God's plan for the redemption of the world.

(2) *Baptism into Christ.*

This phrase should ring familiar. It is that which Christ commanded his church to do as we make disciples of the nations. It is what the apostles called for the people to do in the beginnings of the church as recorded for us in the book of Acts. There are no qualifications to this baptism in Romans six other than the fact that it is baptism "into Christ." And as many as have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into his death. This death breaks the solidarity with Adam/sin/slavery/Pharaoh as master and joins you to your new master. This person has become a part of the delivered people of God because he is identified with Christ/church.

(3) *Common knowledge.*

Paul understands this to be common knowledge because baptism is a common practice. The most natural reading of the text by the audience would have been water baptism. Someone being baptized in water was something that could be seen by others. They could know who had been baptized and who had not been baptized. This text does not allude to some unseen baptism.

⁸Cf. **Numbers 14:3-4**. The spies have just returned from the promised land. Ten of them have brought the report that the Nephalim, the sons of Anak, dwell in the land. They are as grasshoppers in their sight. The people despair and begin to complain against God, Moses and Aaron. It is in the face of taking the land that God promised that the people of God think about going back to being slaves in Egypt.

This was plain ol' get-wet baptism.

When we read this as anything other than water baptism it has to be because we have carried baggage into the text. We have a belief that must be guarded, and this text threatens that if it is understood as water baptism. Our reasoning goes something like this: Participation with Christ in his death means that a person will, no doubt, participate in the final resurrection of the dead. Because not all people who are watered baptized will participate in that resurrection of the just, then this cannot be referring to water baptism. I understand the reasoning (it was mine for a long time). But again, that is something carried into the text and not something that arises from the text. Baptism is not at odds with the promises of God. It is where we are told that the promises of God belong to us. We will inherit those promises through faithfulness. As N.T. Wright says in his commentary on Romans:

Nor is there any conflict between “baptism” as a physical act (a “ritual,” in the loaded sense that is still sometimes used) and “faith” as an interior event—or between either of these and the flooding of the heart by the Spirit of which Paul speaks in 5:5. As a first-century Jew, Paul was happily innocent of the dualistic either/or that keeps such things apart in some contemporary Christian thinking. He was well aware of the problems that arose when baptized persons, regularly attending the eucharist, gave the lie to these symbols by the way they were living; he addresses this problem in 1 Corinthians. Yet he never draws back from his strong view of either baptism or the eucharist, never lapses back into treating them as secondary ... The point here is not to set out a systematic *ordo salutis* in which different things happen to the Christian, outwardly and inwardly, in a particular sequence, but to expound that which is true of the baptized and believing Christian in such a way as to make it clear that one’s basic status now is with Christ rather than with Adam, in the kingdom of grace rather than the kingdom of sin and death. (IBC, vol 10, 535).

It is on the basis of this appeal to baptism, to our incorporation into Christ, that Paul later says, “Now consider yourselves dead indeed to sin and alive unto righteousness.” You are now joined to Christ so live like it.

There is good reason why most of the church throughout her history has understood this passage to be referring to water baptism: it is. Quibbles about this being something other than water baptism seem to be a rather late invention of the church. Most commentators, especially Reformed commentators, will readily admit that this refers to water baptism.⁹ And yes, the Westminster Divines use Romans 6:3-4 as a proof text concerning water baptism in 28.1 of the Confession. There is no tension there.

There is one baptism. That baptism is into Christ and, therefore, brings you into solidarity with the historical people of God. This covenant ritual changes your status. Because of this, because you are identified with Christ and his people, you are to strive for unity with others who are in this body *and* you are to yield your bodies to God as is fitting. This is what God has done for you in your baptism and what God expects of you because of it.

⁹Cf. Murray, 213-217. Though Murray doesn’t carry out the full implications of this, he does not have a problem understanding this as water baptism.

GALATIANS 3:27 - CLOTHED WITH CHRIST

Galatians, along with Romans, is normally set up as Paul's treatises against a merit based salvation. Faith is set over against works as alternative means of salvation. The Lutheran law v. gospel distinction has influenced our reading of these books more than many would care to admit. The problem with this approach has come in dealing with the requirement of faith. That is, you must believe the gospel in order to be saved. Some have said that the resolution is that faith is a gift of God. Therefore it is grace. While that is true—faith is a gift of God—it is still a human response. And so many have tried to figure out ways to ensure that faith is not seen as a merit. While I am certain Paul would in no way advocate a merit-based salvation, I am not sure that this is the best way to read either Galatians or Romans. When you approach Galatians in this way, for instance, there are many passages that are inexplicable. They simply don't make sense.

I mention all of this because it is popular to put Paul's discussion of circumcision in the merit-based salvation category. These Jews were trying to work their way to heaven by being circumcised and keeping the law. Then that is extrapolated out into paralleling with baptism. "Looking to your baptism" then becomes trusting in a human work. But our present passage would not make sense in light of this approach to Galatians. Paul says here that as many as are baptized into Christ have put on Christ. And so, here goes the reasoning: "Since water baptism would be a work that Paul would be against, this must be referring to the real baptism, Spirit baptism." Once again, keeping the text within the overall context of the letter, we find that this would be a bad misreading of what Paul was appealing to concerning their baptism. So let's back up and get the flow of the text.

Galatians is probably the first letter of the New Testament letters that Paul writes. (The only competition to vie for that honor is 1 Thessalonians). The events, though probably not directly connected to it, are at least indirectly connected with what is going on at the Jerusalem Council recorded for us in Acts 15. The events that precipitated that Council are essentially the same issues with which Paul is dealing here. That question is simply this: must Gentiles become Jews in order to be a part of the people of God? That is, must they be circumcised and observe all the Old Covenant laws that separated Jews from the rest of the world (e.g., food laws)? Will uncircumcised Gentiles remain second-class citizens of the kingdom? If you miss this or misconstrue this into some type of proto-Pelagian, self-help, works salvation, you will miss the point almost completely.

Paul had gone through this region on his missionary journeys. He had planted churches throughout the province of Galatia. But it seems from what he writes, there were people coming behind him telling his churches that they must submit themselves to circumcision and obey the law of Moses (food laws, etc.) if they want to be a part of the real people of God, the Jews. Those who were subverting the churches are commonly called Judaizers. At issue in the letter to the Galatians is answer to the question, "How are the people of God defined: by circumcision or by faith in Christ?"

Paul comes out of the gate firing, defending his apostleship with the opening salvo. He is an apostle through Jesus Christ. He is astonished that the Galatians are submitting so quickly to another gospel, which is not another gospel because there is no other gospel. In fact, those who preach another gospel—even if it is Paul himself or an angel from heaven—they are anathema (cf. 1:6-10). Paul then launches off into a defense of himself and the gospel he preaches. He has never been an undercover Gentile or a Hellenizing Jew. All the evidence points to his zeal for the law in the past. But something happened to Paul that changed his course. God revealed his Son to Paul so that he might preach Jesus among the Gentiles. Now Paul is preaching the faith he once

sought to destroy (1:11-24). Paul did go to Jerusalem for a meeting with the apostles (Peter was at that meeting). Barnabas and Titus were with him. Titus was a Greek and none of the apostles compelled him to be circumcised. Instead, the apostles confirmed that the gospel Paul was preaching was correct (cf. 2:1-10). But this is while they were in Jerusalem. Peter goes to Antioch (in Syria), “hub” of the Gentile missionary church (even though there was a Jew-Gentile mix). There, all of the sudden, Peter’s views seem to change.

Certain men come up from Jerusalem from James, and Peter starts withdrawing from table fellowship with the Gentiles. Even Barnabas is led astray with this. You see, before these Jews came up, Peter was eating with the Gentiles. But now he is saying that because he is a Jew he cannot eat with the Gentiles. Paul’s evaluation of the matter is this: “But when I saw that their conduct was *not in step with the truth of the gospel*, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (2:14). This statement is key. The gospel issue that is going on in Antioch and now in Galatia is this: to deny that there is one family of God by faith in Jesus Christ is to deny the gospel. To keep Jews as a distinct group over against the Gentiles in the church (the Gentiles being second-class members) is to deny the gospel. Though this may seem strange to us, this is what Paul is so vehement against in the opening anathema pronounced upon those who preach “another gospel.” The question is: Who is the true people of God? Paul’s answer is “Jesus the Messiah and all those who belong to him by faith.” This stands over against that Jew-Gentile division that people wanted to construct in the church. To deny that the Gentiles are accepted on equal ground as the Jews is a denial of the fact that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of God’s promises (cf. 2:11-21).

The fulfillment of God’s promise found in Christ is Paul’s discussion in chapter three. The promise was given to Abraham, he believed and it was counted unto him for righteousness. And this promise is that God would create a single worldwide family—Jews and Gentiles—through faith. Through Abraham all the nations of the earth would be blessed (cf. 3:1-9).

Within this plan to fulfill the promise the law served a purpose. That purpose is, in sum, that sin would be drawn into one place: Israel, and more specifically Israel’s King. Israel’s King, as Israel’s representative, the one who “embodied” Israel, would take upon himself the curse of the law so that the promise given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles, that they might receive the promised Spirit through faith (cf. 3:10-22). You see, as Israel is God’s priestly nation to and for the world, the one who represents Israel as her priest-king also represented the whole world. Therefore, whenever God’s promise was fulfilled through Israel, that would mean the world would be blessed. This happened when Jesus took upon himself the curse of the law.

Approaching our passage now, Paul is still dealing with this Jew-Gentile relationship and the whole relationship with the law as the defining mark of the people of God in 3:23-29. In this passage faith, Christ and baptism all have an interesting relationship with one another. *Faith* is personified: “Before faith came” and “until the coming faith” (3:23). Now we know that this cannot be the subjective experience of faith. An entire chapter in Hebrews tells us that there were many who had faith long before the New Covenant was inaugurated. Indeed, Paul has just spoken of Abraham’s faith. Paul is speaking about something else. Christ is put in the place of faith as coming in 3:24. But in 3:25 it is faith that has come. Paul is still talking about the fulfillment of God’s promises. The law’s relationship to that is this: the law held the people of God under its care until the coming of Christ who has brought to fulfillment that which God promised Abraham (i.e., a worldwide family in which Gentiles are included with the Jews as the people of God). So Paul draws the conclusion that the true people of God, the true seed of Abraham are those who belong to Jesus the Messiah, the Seed. These people who are identified with Christ, or

are in Christ, these are the heirs of the promises given to Abraham. As many as are “in Christ” are all sons of God through faith.

It is within this context that Paul says, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (3:27). And in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, “for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” So, about whom is Paul speaking? What is this baptism into Christ in which they put on Christ? Is this the “unseen” baptism? Or is the water baptism by which they have entered into the church, the Christ-people, the body of Christ? Well, if you begin with the right questions—questions derived from the text—then this referring to water baptism will be no problem. Galatians is *not* about externalism v. internalism, ritual v. reality. It is about the questions, who are the people of God and what does that mean when they sit down to eat? Is their one family or two? Are their first-class family members and second-class family members? Paul says that the people of God are defined as those who are loyal to Jesus Christ. Or, as it is normally said, the people of God are those who are in Christ through faith.

Someone will say then, “There you have it. It is by *faith*, not by baptism that we are identified with Christ!” The problem with this reasoning is that Paul does not present faith and baptism as antithetical in the text. He moves from faith to baptism without explanation or equivocation ... as if there were no conflict between the two. For Paul, faith was not about some abstract, conceptual idea; something floating around in your head. You find Christ with his people, his body, his bride, the church. Your allegiance to Christ (or faith in Christ) is sealed in your baptism into Christ as you become a part of the people of God in Christ. There is no appeal to a secret group within the church. In fact, he is saying just the opposite. *All* of the Galatians—Jew and Gentile—are sons of God through faith in Christ because they have put on Christ in their baptism. Because they are identified with Christ in baptism, they are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise. And because there is one family, there should only be one table. And every family member must be welcomed to that table. Paul is appealing to their oneness in Christ so that they will live it out as the church before the world.

This is borne out throughout the rest of the epistle. Chapter four begins with a continuing discussion of the law and its relationship with the promise. The picture given there is that the law was a guardian that kept the people of God as children until the father was ready to declare the son to be the owner of the inheritance. God’s people were children kept under the pedagogue of the law (cf. 3:24-25). But when the fullness of time came—when it was time to bring the child to adulthood—God sent forth his son, made of woman and born under the law that he might redeem those who were under the law. Through the Son the people of God joined to the Son are now themselves sons of God. Because they are sons they are heirs of God. Paul asks the Galatians then why they want to go back to childhood in 4:8-19. He then employs the story of Hagar and Sarah and their children to say that those who are wanting to define themselves by the law are sons of the bondwoman. Those who are defined by union with Christ are sons of promise (cf. 4:21-31).

The Galatians should not submit again to the yoke of slavery. If they begin to define themselves by Jewishness (i.e., circumcision) Christ is of no profit to them. They have denied that Christ is the fulfillment of the law (cf. 5:1-6). The Galatians are now free, but they are not to use that freedom as an opportunity for the flesh and cause more divisions. Rather they are to serve one another in love. They are to walk in the Spirit and not fulfill the lusts of the flesh, some of which, not so incidentally, include divisions. They are to be bearing the fruit of the Spirit. They are to bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Interestingly enough, one of the ways we have fallen into the Galatian error is through our view of covenant and baptism (to bring this to some pointed application). Instead of saying that

Jews have a better table than the Gentiles, we have said that there are those who are in *the* covenant and those who are simply in covenant. (And for the life of me I cannot understand the biblical rationale for this.) Around the Reformed tables there is no problem talking about being baptized and being a member of “the covenant,” but we must never say that this covenant means that these people are in the same covenant as those who will persevere to the end. The question is, since Christ has come, how many covenants are there? And if you believe that there is more than one—that is, other than the new covenant—what is the biblical rationale for that? And if you believe that there is only one covenant, how can you say that we are not all in relationship with God in the same covenant? Was the promise given to Abraham of which we are heirs in Christ that God would be in covenant with us real believers and in a different covenant with our children until they can become real believers? Or did God promise Abraham, “I will be a God to you and to your children?” Have we divided up the people of God along different lines but with the same basic error? If we have, our problems may be greater than what we think happens when a person is baptized with water.

Baptism in Galatians 3:27 is referring to the baptism that all of the Galatians received when they entered into the church: water baptism. In that baptism they put on Christ because they became identified with him and his people. That status brings with it the obligation to see that others who have been baptized into Christ are a part of the same family, and are, therefore, to be joined at the same table. God help us to avoid the error of the Galatians, especially over that which is to point to our family unity.

TITUS 3:5 - THE WASHING OF REGENERATION AND THE RENEWAL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Because Spirit baptism has been equated with the internal and secret work of the Spirit, Titus 3:5 has been called into service to seal the deal. I mean, if you believe this washing in Titus 3:5 is referring to baptism, then you are most certainly Roman Catholic because you believe in baptismal regeneration. This phrase, “baptismal regeneration,” has frightened many Protestants in the modern era. Sometimes this fear is warranted because of all of the baggage some people hang on the phrase. But then there are those pesky little texts. Scared of Roman Catholic error (rightly in my opinion), we have engaged in hermeneutical yoga to make the text mean what we want it to mean. What I hope to show you in this section is that this text is dealing with plain ol’ water baptism, and that this is the way the church has understood the text from the beginning. What will take some work is adjusting our definition of regeneration to fit the biblical evidence. (Contrary to the thinking of many modern Reformed folks, the definition of regeneration has never really been understood in one particular sense universally by all Reformed people. Some definitions fit the biblical use better than others.) With this said, let us turn our attention now to the text and work out the meaning of it.

Even though Paul was certainly the most able theologian the church has ever had, we don’t find Paul’s writings to be in the form of textbooks of systematic theologies. Paul does not set out to expound particular doctrines point-by-point. Instead, what we find is that Paul writes into particular situations dealing with particular problems or issues that arise in churches. There is no doubt Paul expresses foundational doctrines that are consistent with one another (and can therefore be more-or-less systematized), but he does not set out to do this. For this reason, we must be careful as we approach the text to understand what is going on. There is always the temptation to treat Paul’s letters with chapters and verses as if we are reading the Westminster Standards.

The danger is realized many times in a passage like Titus 3:5. We come to the text. We

see familiar words. The sentence is extracted from the text and put into a certain column. There is nothing wrong with developing the consistency between various parts of Scripture. But you cannot do this while leaving contextual matters behind as if the historical situation or the larger context are just the cave from which the gold nugget is mined. Once it is mined, the cave becomes irrelevant. Such can never be the case if we have a high view of Scripture. God gave Scripture the way that he did for a purpose. And we must understand it within all of its various contexts; i.e., historical, cultural, textual.

Titus, like Timothy, is a companion and true son of Paul. He is one of Paul's more well-known apprentices. Paul has left Titus in Crete, an island in the Mediterranean, to set the church in order there and ordain elders in every place (cf. 1:5). Crete was not a lovely island with a low crime rate and high morals all around. Far from it! Crete was a place where wickedness abounded. Paul even makes mention of this in chapter one of his letter to Titus. He says, "One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons'" (1:12). Obviously this type of lifestyle was continuing in the church when it should not have. For this reason Paul says, "This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith..." (1:13). They had a conduct problem in the church. People were also causing disputes over Jewish myths and such. The people of God were not supposed to act in such ways.

In response to these problems, Paul tells Titus that he is supposed to teach what is in accord with sound doctrine (2:1). And what might this be? Paul doesn't leave Titus to guess. That which is in accord with sound doctrine is that older men are to be "sober-minded, dignified and self-controlled, sound in faith, love, and in steadfastness" (2:2). "Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled" (2:3-5). Younger men are also to be self-controlled. And Titus himself is to be an example of the faith (2:6-8). Slaves are to be submissive to their masters and hard workers (2:9-10). This is in accord with sound doctrine. The reason is then given for this: the grace of God which has appeared bringing salvation teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly passions and live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age (2:11ff.).

"This present age" here for Paul is a major point for his understanding of what Jesus did and what salvation is all about. The first century Jewish understanding of what God was going to do in history is defined by particular ages: the present age and the age to come. The Jews believed that the present (evil) age was the time in which they lived and the people of God would be persecuted under the Gentiles. (I summarize greatly.) The age to come was the age in which God would vindicate his people and make them rulers over the nations. This would happen at the end of history as we know it with a resurrection from the dead of all those faithful to God. In Paul's writings, the age to come has broken in on the present evil age in the resurrection of Jesus. God did in, through and for Jesus in the middle of history what he promised to do in, through and for his people at the end of history. With the resurrection of Jesus "the age to come" is now here, overlapping this present evil age.

I take the time to deal with this because this has everything to do with what Paul has said about their conduct and what Paul will say about their conduct in the next chapter. Those who are in Christ or in the church (it matters not which one you use in Paul's writing) are living *already* in the age to come. Therefore, they must not live as if they were still identified with "this present evil age." The contrast is made clear at the beginning of chapter three where Paul again exhorts Titus to exhort those under his charge to proper conduct, conduct befitting those who have a particular status. The conduct described in 3:3 is the conduct of those who live in this present

evil age. Paul says that “we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.” But now something has happened. With the same wording that Paul uses in 2:11, he says that the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior has appeared (3:4). When that goodness and loving kindness appeared “he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (3:5).

After 3:7 Paul returns to what he is dealing with: the Christians in Crete living like they are supposed to. They are to live this way because of all that is true about them. They are to conduct themselves as becomes Christians. They are to avoid foolish controversies. And they are to discipline those who insist on causing divisions (cf. 3:8-11).

So then, in dealing with the broad context of the book, we understand that Paul is exhorting Titus to exhort those under his care to behave properly based upon what God has done for them in Christ.

Understanding the basic flow of the entire letter, we can now turn to the particular verse(s) that concern us. As we do several questions have to be addressed when approaching this text: What does it mean that God “saved”? Who is this “us”? What does it mean that God saved us *by the instrument* of the “washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit”?

(1) “Saved”

Whenever we approach terms like “saved,” we usually have a definition all ready to plug in there. It is like the word cat. You don’t have to define what a cat is. Everyone knows what a cat is. So when we here saved we read, “Those whom God has elected to final salvation.” But while God has elected some to final salvation and will save some ultimately, the word saved does not always refer to this. Paul’s referent, though, is not a twentieth century systematic theology. Paul is an Old Testament (for Paul, Bible would do) theologian. When he says “saved,” he understands it in the sense that Moses says it at the end of his blessing pronounced upon Israel in “Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, *a people saved by the LORD*, the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph! Your enemies shall come fawning to you, and you shall tread upon their backs” (Deut 33:29). The LXX there uses the same word that Paul uses in our text. Israel was the people of God, delivered from Egypt and promised a land. Israel was that people that Moses proclaimed just a few sentences earlier in that text, “The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms. And he thrust out the enemy before you and said, Destroy” (Deut 33:27). To be a member of “saved Israel” was to be “saved” with the rest of the community. It was to be among the people who were separate from the nations, who had YHWH as their God. Being saved did not denote necessarily an internal work of the Spirit, but your participation with the people of God.

Paul here is speaking to Titus about the church which is in Christ in Crete. The church as the church has been delivered. I believe this is further validated by Paul’s reference to the people.

(2) “Us”

Who is this? Well, it must include Paul because it is first person. But it is first person plural also. Is Paul just referring to himself and Titus? No, because his concern is for all the people in the church in Crete. He is referring to all those in Crete in the church who need these

exhortations. Whatever Paul is saying about being saved or about being regenerated or renewed he is saying about all those about whom he is writing. It has become common practice for some to see Paul referring to something like a secret society of *real* believers within the church. “You know who the ‘us’ really is!” This is more of a gnostic understanding than a biblical one. It is a totally unnatural reading of the text. He is referring to the entire church along with himself. “This is what God has done for us.” Paul is dealing with the historical people of God. He is dealing with people in the church whom Titus will have to correct for their misconduct. Certainly genuine faith is demanded. That is exactly what Paul is calling for! And those who don’t demonstrate it (in this instance by continuing to stir up divisions; 3:10-11) are to be removed from the people of God. But even if they are removed from the people of God later, Paul is saying, in this context, that at this present time they are a part of the “us.” If they are excommunicated, they will be a part of “them,” the world.

(3) “Not according to works ... mercy”

This action of saving his people is not because of some righteousness that God saw in them, but it is according to his own mercy, his covenant love and faithfulness. This too is drawn from God’s dealing with Israel. In Deut. 9:4-6 God through Moses tells his people that it is not because of their own righteousness that the nations will be dispossessed. In fact, his people had been a stubborn people. God would deliver his people and deliver the nations into their hands because of his own faithfulness to his covenant.

Now sometimes the reasoning from this concerning baptism goes something like this: since God’s salvation is not according to works but by grace alone, and baptism is a work, baptism can have no part in salvation. One of the premises is flawed in that reasoning, which makes you conclude the wrong thing. The flawed premise is “baptism is a work [of man].” Outside of a covenantal understanding of baptism, I suppose that baptism would be taken as a work of man. In the baptistic scheme, baptism is what *I* do as a profession of faith. This is the position that baptist(ic) commentators take on passages like Romans 6. John MacArthur, for example, in his commentary on Romans 6 understands water baptism to be a “work” and thus antithetical to salvation by grace. Because of this baptism can have no part in salvation.¹⁰ He says,

Many people interpret Paul’s argument in Romans 6:3-10 as referring to water baptism. However, Paul is simply using the physical analogy of water baptism to teach the spiritual reality of the believer’s union with Christ. Water baptism is the outward identification of an inward reality—faith in Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. Paul was not advocating salvation by water baptism; that would have contradicted everything he had just said about salvation by grace and *not works* in Romans 3-5, which has no mention of water baptism.¹¹

¹⁰I also realize that MacArthur, along with many of my own friends in the Reformed camp, would have a difficult time seeing “salvation” as I have described it in the context of Titus. Therefore, baptism must be understood differently. My contention, of course, is that words like “salvation” are defined too narrowly many times and, with those narrow definitions, pose all kinds of problems with the exegesis of the texts.

¹¹ MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Romans 1-8, 321; emphasis mine

Perspective is everything here. In the biblical model, baptism is the work of God. Baptism is what God declares about you based upon his grace given to you. Baptism is not a work of man but the gift of God. These different perspectives make all the difference. If you are looking at it in the wrong way or reasoning from the wrong premise, you are going to come out with the wrong conclusion. There will be many things that simply won't fit. This is why understanding what follows as referring to water baptism *cannot be understood as a work of man somehow meriting salvation*.

(4) “By the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit”

This “washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” is the instrument that is used to accomplish what has been described above. This is the way the word “by” is used here. It controls both activities expressed here: “washing and renewing.” But this phrase is the real sticking point. What exactly is this washing of regeneration? Well, historically, most of the church throughout her history has taken it to be referring to baptism.

Two well-respected Greek lexicons translate this and explain this in this way. Baur-Ardnt-Gingrich-Danker (BAGD) translates the word “washing” as *the washing of baptism*. When dealing with this particular verse it translates it, “*the bath that brings about regeneration.*”¹² Louw and Nida say, [*loutron*] “ceremonial washing referring to baptism - 'washing, baptism.' ... Similarly, in Tt 3.5, [*loutron*] has generally been regarded as referring to baptism.”¹³ *Loutron*, the Greek word translated “washing,” has its roots in the worship of Old Covenant Israel. This family of words is used to refer to the bronze laver in the court of the Tabernacle that was used for cleansing the priests before they entered the tabernacle proper, the presence of God (cf. Ex 38:26, 27; 40:12; Lev 8:6; 14:8, 9; 15:5; et. al.). Before this washing they were considered unclean and thus cut off from the presence of God. This is death in one sense. The bath brought them back into a state of life (i.e., communion with God and his people). All of these repeated washings have now been reduced to one in the New Covenant: baptism into Christ. It is through this washing that a person enters into the covenant people of God and is able to communion with God. The connection with the bronze laver and the ritual cleansings in the Old Covenant are the reasons that you will sometimes see this phrase translated “the laver of regeneration.”

Now we come to the word “regeneration” itself. If we understand this word with the meaning that it has taken on in the past couple of hundred years, then I can understand why people would have a problem taking this to be referring to water baptism. *Not everyone who is baptized in water is undoubtedly assured of final salvation*. There are people who are baptized in water that will spend an eternity in hell. So, the question is, How is Paul using this word? Is he using “regeneration” to refer to the secret work of the Spirit wherein persevering faith is created, or is he using it in another way?

Once again, I believe Paul is using the word to refer to a *status* that the baptized have and *not necessarily* some internal work of the Spirit wherein he creates persevering faith. Ray Sutton, in his book *Signed, Sealed and Delivered*, goes through a brief historical sketch of how the word *regeneration* was transformed in meaning throughout the history of the church. Definitions are important. If two people approach the same word with two different definitions but never

¹²s.v., λουτρόν

¹³Louw and Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testamen Based on Semantic Domains, 53.43.

acknowledge the differences, then they will both walk away thinking the other person believes something that he doesn't. Never have I seen this more true than in the current debates. But this is understandable to some degree. As I said, throughout the history of the church the meaning of "regeneration" has changed. In the early church, just after the days of the apostles, there is no doubt that "regeneration" was associated with water baptism. Those baptized were considered "regenerate" and "illuminated."

Justin Martyr (2nd century) calls baptism "the water-bath for the forgiveness of sins and regeneration," and "the bath of conversion and knowledge of God."¹⁴ J. N. D. Kelly notes, "... the theory that [baptism] mediated the Holy Spirit was fairly general."¹⁵ Theophilus of Antioch represents baptism as "imparting remissions of sins and rebirth (*palingenesia*)."¹⁶ The word translated "rebirth" is the same Greek word used in Titus 3:5 translated "regeneration." Irenaeus says that baptism is "the seal of eternal life and our rebirth in God so that we are no longer the sons of mortal men only, but also children of the immortal and indefectible God."¹⁷ Kelly concludes, "The early view, therefore, like the Pauline, would seem to be that baptism itself is the vehicle for conveying the Spirit to believers."¹⁸ In the fourth century this same type of terminology continued to be used in Augustine who commonly called baptism "the laver of regeneration."¹⁹

Now we could conclude that all of our church fathers were proto medieval Roman Catholics. Or we could say, "Maybe they meant something different than what it later was developed into." I opt for the latter. In the middle ages regeneration became tied up with the infusion of grace, as if grace were a substance. This was just one part of an entire sacramentology that had gone off course. As I discussed above, grace is not a substance that can be infused. Grace is a relational term, a covenantal term. The early church seems to have understood this better. Regeneration was a matter of a person's citizenship, if you will, rather than some invisible ooze that filled his body.

The English Reformers sought to recover the early church understanding and do away with the medieval Roman Catholic understanding. Regeneration was a transfer of status from outside the church to inside the church. This is why in their *Book of Common Prayer* concerning the Office of Baptism, the English left the words, "We yield thee most hearty thanks, most merciful Father, that it hath pleased thee to regenerate this infant with thy Holy Spirit...." This was something that the German Reformer Martin Bucer, a man who had great influence on Calvin in Strasbourg, signed off on when Thomas Cranmer sent it for his review. As Sutton notes in his book, for the English reformers "Final salvation was not automatic if the person did not persevere in the faith. Taken as a whole, this view was very different from the mechanical, late

¹⁴Schaff, History of the Christian Church, 2:253.

¹⁵Early Christian Doctrines, 194.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 195

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Cf. e.g., City of God, 1.27.

Medieval view of salvation.”²⁰ Eventually, though, the Puritans began to develop the meaning of regeneration that is so common to us today. Regeneration became to be understood as that which was totally internal, and, therefore, it became totally separate from the external sacrament. Puritans tended to equate regeneration exclusively with the effectual call of God unto salvation. And with this definition it became almost impossible to speak about every baptized person being regenerated through the waters of baptism. But if we take the Puritan’s definition of regeneration and read it back into the early church and even the Reformers, we are going to think that the whole church was in grave error until the seventeenth century. Even the principal father of the Reformed Church could be considered to be in grave error at this point. Keith Matthison notes in his book Given For You, that Calvin had a debate with the Lutheran Westphal over the issue of baptismal regeneration. Westphal was saying that Calvin denied the doctrine. As Matthison writes, “Westphal accused Calvin of denying that men are born again by the washing of baptism. Calvin calls this accusation a figment of Westphal’s imagination and says, ‘Having distinctly asserted, that men are regenerated by baptism, just as they are by the word, I early obviated the impudence of the man, and left nothing for his invective to strike at but his own shadow.’”²¹ We might even have to go after our own Standards. David F. Wright, professor of ecclesiastical history at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland and noted expert on the Westminster assembly, writes these words concerning the issue of baptismal regeneration and the Standards:

What then about the efficacy of baptism according to the Westminster Confession? Its central affirmation seems clear: ‘the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost’ (28.6). It is true that a variety of qualifications to this assertion are entered...But these qualifications serve in fact only to highlight the clarity of the core declaration, which is set forth as follows in the preceding chapter on sacraments in general:

neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it, but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution; which contains...a promise of benefit to worthy receivers (27.3).

The Westminster divines viewed baptism as the instrument and occasion of regeneration by the Spirit, of the remission of sins, of ingrafting into Christ (cf. 28.1). The Confession teaches baptismal regeneration.²²

But who knows? Maybe the whole church has been wrong and one tiny sliver of the church in America has it all down pat. Maybe we should excommunicate the entire church before the seventeenth century for teaching damnable error. One thing should be clear, even though different views have been argued back and forth, you cannot say that there is no Scriptural warrant for the belief *or* that the church from her beginnings didn’t hold to some form of baptismal regeneration.

I believe what Paul is saying in Titus 3:5 is essentially equivalent to what he says in

²⁰Sutton, Signed, Sealed and Delivered, 101.

²¹Matthison, Given For You: Reclaiming Calvin’s Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, 14-15, n. 52.

²²"Baptism at the Westminster Assembly" in Calvin Studies, 80; quoted in Joel Garver, *Baptismal Regeneration and the Westminster Confession* 28.6.

Romans 6: being baptized puts you in new relationships with God and the world. Regeneration, the way Paul uses it (and many throughout the history of the church), speaks of the status of the person as being a member of the people of God who have access to communion with God. Because of this status, as is made clear by the context, they are not to act like the Gentile world around them. They are to live faithfully.

The only other time this word is used in the NT is in Matt 19:28 where Jesus says, “Assuredly I say to you, that in *the regeneration*, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. What Jesus is describing here is the ushering in of the new age and, necessarily, the (re)new(ed) people of God. *The regeneration* is the time after Jesus’ resurrection when he brings creation back to life in himself. His people, the church, baptized by the life-giving Spirit, are the embodiment of the regeneration. Therefore, to be a part of *the regeneration* is to be a part of Christ’s resurrected body, the church, the people of the new and last age.

Some might respond, “Even if I grant these things as true, I don’t like to talk this way.” That is fine if you don’t want to talk this way. But don’t condemn many in the church for talking this way. Don’t automatically align them with Rome and call them heretics. Your opinion is yours, but you do not have the right to judge your brother with your opinion as the standard.

Some might respond, “I think talking this way will give people false assurance.” Maybe so, maybe not. Talking about salvation by grace may give people false assurance. Do we stop that? People misunderstand what faith is. Do we stop calling them to faith because they might misunderstand us? If the church is teaching the whole counsel of God concerning salvation, promises and warnings, privileges and responsibilities, then the condemnation will be on their own heads. We cannot insure that we will not be misunderstood. Jesus was misunderstood. Paul was misunderstood. We will be misunderstood. What we cannot do, trying to avoid misunderstanding, is to misrepresent the Scriptures which hold all these things together perfectly.

Though we should be careful in how we understand and explain baptismal regeneration, we should not cringe in fear or anger when it comes up. We need to understand the whole counsel of God which keeps this doctrine defined properly. Only then will we not get off the biblical road. But remember, no matter what ditch you are in, you are still in a ditch.

1PETER 3:20-21 - BAPTISM NOW SAVES YOU

Our attention now moves away from the Pauline epistles to Peter’s first epistle. Peter says something here that curls the hairs on the backs of many protestant necks: “baptism now saves us.” As we examine the text, I want to show you that what Peter says is completely in line with what Paul says and what Peter himself preached as recorded for us in the book of Acts. We don’t have to resort to an unnatural reading of the text to explain away water baptism (which the text demands) in order to avoid the errors in aberrant theology. The text understood in terms of covenant poses no problems to understanding this as water baptism.

A particular text cannot be understood apart from all of its relevant contexts (e.g., historical, cultural, textual). To lift a text from its context(s), setting it aside for individual examination without considering the relevant contexts will lead inevitably to reading something into the text that is not there. For instance, if someone decides one thousand years from now to come back and study the Cajun English of South Louisiana, they will need to understand much about several different contexts. If this student of Cajun English comes across the phrase, “We passed by Boudreaux’s house,” there are some things that he will not understand by simply looking up words in a dictionary. In fact, if he only does this without looking at the cultural

context and how that phrase is used, he is going to draw the mistaken conclusion that this group of people simply came in close geographical proximity to the house on the way to some other place. But we who know the cultural contexts and the way that Cajun's speak the English language, that phrase means that this group of people actually stopped and visited Boudreaux. Big difference in meaning if you don't have things in the proper context.

For this reason, I have tried (as brief as it has been) to set up some of the contexts of the relevant passages so that we might better understand what is being said in the passage. The more our understanding of all the relevant contexts grows, the better our understanding of the passage is. And so, we need to see the flow of the entire epistle of 1 Peter so that we can understand this one particular text within it.

We must understand the "big picture" of the epistle if we are to understand any particular text within it. To get the big picture we must first begin with who the author is and to whom is he writing. Peter, the apostle, is the author of this epistle. He is certainly a Jew whose primary ministry was to the Jews according to the division of labor outlined for us by Paul in Galatians 2. This did not mean that Peter had no ministry to the Gentiles ("the nations"). We see in Acts 10 that Peter is made to realize that there will be one people of God, and it will consist of Jews and Gentiles (without the Gentiles becoming Jews). And he brings the gospel to the household of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a Gentile.

The apostle Peter is writing to the "elect strangers of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bythnia" (1:1). The "dispersion" can be used as a technical word indicating what happened to the Jews after their Babylonian/Medo-Persian captivity. Some Jews returned back to the home land. Others remained dispersed throughout the Empire. Peter could be writing to those Jewish Christians. More likely is the fact that he is writing to the church, made up of Jews and Gentiles, scattered throughout the Roman Empire. The way Peter attributes the titles of Old Covenant Israel to the New Covenant church throughout his epistle makes this the best option. That Peter is referring to the church when he speaks about "the elect" or "chosen" of God in 1:1-2 is confirmed by his final salutations in 5:13 where he writes: "She who is in Babylon, elect together with *you*, greets you; and *so does* Mark my son." So much is this "she" understood as "the church" by translators, the AV inserts the words "the church." This last reference is then tied to the first reference, bringing the two together. Peter is writing to the church(es) scattered throughout the eastern Roman Empire.

Another question we must answer concerning context is why Peter is writing this epistle. Peter's reason for writing must be drawn from themes picked up in the text itself. And it is virtually without dispute that Peter is writing to and for Christians who have and will suffer persecution for the faith. Peter, the apostle-pastor, is writing to encourage the people of God to persevere in faith through the suffering because of the promised hope in Christ. Trials will come. Persecution will happen. But they must endure *faithfully* because God has promised to reward their faithfulness by allowing them to participate in the glory of Christ at his coming.

From the beginning of this epistle we see these two themes of suffering and hope woven together. Both are tied inexorably together with the death and resurrection of Christ. The death of Jesus provides the "pattern" for our suffering and gives meaning to it. The resurrection of Jesus provides the ground of hope that awaits us on the other side of suffering.

Chapter one verses three through twelve begin the body of the epistle. Peter begins by telling his readers is something that cannot be understood apart from the promises of God given to and through the prophets in the Old Covenant. (This is an important point, especially when we come to our particular text.) The resurrection of Jesus has brought about the promise of God given to and through the prophets concerning his people. More specifically, the promise was that

God would “raise his people from the dead, putting his Spirit in them.” This is that which Ezekiel prophesied in chapter thirty-seven of his prophecy. Peter says that through Jesus Christ God has re-created his people. The church in Christ is the resurrected Israel, the one that was dead but is now alive again. The church is this new Israel and therefore the hope of Israel now realized in Christ belongs to the church. That hope is basically this: the church as God’s people will be vindicated by God before the rest of the world and will have dominion over the world. That hope finds its basis in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is now seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven. For now, we must endure the trials that try (or test) our faith. These trials are refining us, making us fit to inherit the glory that is promised.

The discussion of suffering, hope and exhortation continues in 1:13-25. The promise of God in Christ—the Christian hope—is certain. Peter tells his readers that the minds set on this hope that is still yet future will live in a holy manner. Something interesting is said in this section that tells us that Peter thinks about the present age and the age to come in the same way that Paul does. In 1:20 Peter says that Jesus was revealed in “these last times.” The word “last” is the Greek word *eschatos*, from which we get *eschaton* and *eschatology*. Peter understands that with the resurrection of Jesus the final (or “last”) age has broken into the present age (the age in which the people of God will still suffer). Those identified with Jesus and his death and resurrection (i.e., in the church) *already* live in that coming age but have *not yet* experienced the consummation of it. Life in the present both participates in and anticipates the fullness of the age to come. Christians straddle, as it were, two ages. Because of this they must live as age-to-come people (e.g., holy, loving one another, etc.) in this present age because they trust God’s promises for the future hope.

The implications of being the last-age people are spelled out in 2:1–3:7. Because of who they are, they are to put aside all sorts of vices and desire the pure milk of God’s word that they may grow up to salvation (quite the interesting phrase!). As God’s people—a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession—they are being built into a temple in which the Spirit dwells. They are called to keep themselves pure, be obedient, endure hardships and live within their marriages as is fitting of those who have this status.

Suffering will come. And God’s people in Christ must respond to that suffering in particular ways according to 3:8-22. If and when they suffer, they must do so as a Christian. That is, they must suffer unjustly. The world should have no legitimate accusation against them of lawlessness. Their example of this type of suffering is found in our Lord himself who, being the Just one, suffered for the unjust in order that he might bring his people to God; i.e., the promise.

As Christ suffered unjustly so the people of God can expect to suffer unjustly, says Peter in 4:1-11. So they are to take on the same attitude toward suffering that Jesus had. They are to avoid living like the Gentiles (i.e., in all kinds of wickedness; 4:2-6). They are instead to live in love with one another (4:7-11). Peter emphasizes again that they will suffer in 4:12-19. But they should never be guilty of evil when they do (therefore, suffering justly).

Peter closes out the main body of the epistle with a word to the elders of the church who shepherd the flock of God in 5:1-11. They are to carry out their duties faithfully and be examples to the flock of what it means to live godly lives. Peter’s final words concern the church living faithfully and standing firm (5:12-14).

Our particular passage finds its meaning within this overall structure. The audience and author, the occasion for writing and the “big picture” of the epistle all contribute to our understanding of what is going on in our particular passage. Peter is telling them how they must endure suffering; i.e., they should suffer for doing what is good as opposed to doing what is evil

(3:8-17). Then Peter turns immediately to our example in suffering and our ground of hope: Jesus and his resurrection (3:18-22). It is couched within this section that we find the statement “baptism now saves you.” Peter is encouraging the Christians to persevere through unjust suffering because of the promise/hope given through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is this promise that is given to them in their baptism.

There are many details in this passage which we will not be able to cover. But we can grasp Peter’s main point without having all the details perfectly worked out. This is not beginning a new discussion in 3:18. This is indicated by the little conjunction “for” or “because.” In 3:17, which is somewhat of a summary statement of 3:8-16, Peter tells his readers that it is better to suffer for doing what is good than what is evil. The reason that they should do this is found beginning in 3:18: “Because Christ has suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust....” This becomes a natural lead-in to the ground or foundation of the Christian hope. The death and resurrection of Jesus are the pattern and the foundation for the Christian hope. The basic movement is this: “as it was with Christ, so it is with those in Christ.”

There are some differing ways of understanding Peter’s formulation “being put to death in/by the flesh but being made alive in/by the S/spirit.” While the basic understanding of Jesus’ death and resurrection is clearly understood, the reference to the disobedient spirits in the days of Noah presents some time frame difficulty. Two plausible understandings of this stand out in my mind. First, there is the translation which makes the statements parallel in this way: “Jesus was put to death *by* the flesh and made alive *by* the Spirit.” That is, “flesh” would characterize the wickedness of the people who put Christ to death as Peter proclaimed in Acts 2:23. The Spirit would then be the agent of resurrection from the dead (something affirmed elsewhere in Scripture; cf. Rom 8:11).

Another possibility is this translation: “Jesus was put to death *in* the flesh and made alive *in* the spirit.” This would emphasize the two conditions of his body before and after the resurrection. Jesus died a fleshly body (with no bad moral connotations) and he was raised a spiritual body (i.e., a body that is raised and transformed by the Spirit; cf. 1Cor 15). The interpretation is important because in 3:19 we meet the little phrase that can be translated either “in which” or “by whom.” “In which” would refer to the resurrected body. “By whom” would refer to the Spirit of God.

The importance of this question concerning the interpretation is this: did Jesus go and preach to these spirits in prison *after* his resurrection? Or Did Jesus through the Spirit preach to these spirits now in prison *during* the days of Noah? Much ink has been spilled over this question, and we are not going to settle it here. Whether Jesus preached to these particular spirits *after* his resurrection or during the days of Noah does not change what Peter is saying about the hope of the Christian as found in the historical salvation of Noah and his household. These disobedient spirits who are now in prison were put in prison because of their disobedience in the days of Noah when God’s patience was being extended while the ark was being built. It was in the ark that a few, that is, eight souls, were saved *through water*. This is where Peter is headed with this discussion. His concern is that his readers be comforted and be encouraged to persevere through suffering because they have a hope.

So Peter tells his readers that the antitype of Noah’s salvation through the water is the baptism which now saves us. But what is an antitype? Shortly, it is the fulfillment of a type. A type in Scripture is the prefigurement of something that is to come. For example, Joshua is a type and Jesus is the antitype. What Joshua prefigures, Jesus fulfills. Peter is saying that the fulfillment of the type found in the story of the salvation of Noah and his family through the water is Christian baptism. When Peter says that baptism *now* saves you, he is most certainly

contrasting the old age and the new age. “In that age Noah was saved through water. In this age you are saved through baptism.”

Before moving on to the qualifier to this statement (“not the putting off of the filth of the flesh but the answer/appeal to God for a good conscience”), we need to understand how Peter is using the word “saved” in this context. Without hesitation or qualification Peter says that Noah and his household, the eight souls, were “saved” through water. His understanding of this must govern our interpretation. Peter was well aware that Ham was on the ark. Remember Ham? Ham was the son who, after the flood, was cursed by Noah. He was revealed to be of the seed of the serpent. To put it in language understood by many in the evangelical world, Ham didn’t go to heaven when he died.

One problem that I have seen as people have dealt with these Old Covenant examples found in the New Covenant Scriptures is this: they draw contrasts where the biblical author draws a parallel. By doing this the text is turned on its head to say something it does say. Peter is not drawing a contrast here. He is drawing a parallel (and a rather strong one with the type-antitype relationship). In the construction of the ark God had Noah build a new world so that the world might be saved. Those who participated in this new world called “the ark” were saved through the water. In the same way, those who participate in the new world that Jesus has built through his death and resurrection, the church, are considered saved also.

The parallels between the type and antitype are clear in the passage:

3:20	3:21
“eight persons”	“you”
“were saved”	“saves”
“through water”	“baptism”

Okay, then, the passage is clear enough. But some will say, “Peter qualifies that statement that it is not the putting off of the filth of the flesh (i.e., water baptism), but the answer of a good conscience toward God. Isn’t Peter saying that it is not water baptism that saves you but an internal work?” There are a couple of problems in seeing this baptism as referring to a dry baptism.

First, Peter clearly emphasizes the parallel between the water through which Noah and his family were saved and the baptism that these Christians had experienced. Why emphasize the water in the experience of Noah? Why not simply say, “Just as Noah and his family were delivered in the time of the pouring out of God’s wrath, so you will be delivered as God’s people”? Why even bring the reference to baptism into the discussion at all? The presence of water in this context is significant.

Second, Peter has a pastoral concern. Peter is pointing to the objective sign that they are the people of God. They need assurance that they really are the new Israel. Peter says, “You are by means of the baptism which now saves you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Peter is not wanting these people to figure out which baptism he is talking about.

I think a better explanation of this qualifying statement is this: baptism is not merely a physical washing that removes the filth of the flesh. Rather, it is the appeal to God for a good conscience (i.e., that comes through the forgiveness of sins). This would line up rather well with what Peter preaches in Acts when he says “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name

of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of your sins*, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Baptism is God’s sign to his people that he is their God and they are his people. As we apply that sign it is an appeal to God to be faithful to his promises and, for one, forgive us of our sins, thereby cleansing our consciences before him. Baptism is the effective sign through which our family identity is changed. We are no longer to be identified with the world but with God’s people, the people that are on this ark. To be sure, there are “Ham’s” within the ark, but they are still on the ark.

These sorts of parallels abound in the New Testament. Paul says that those who were delivered from Egypt and passed through the sea were baptized. But many of them fell in the wilderness. And so, the Corinthian church, the ones upon whom the last age has come, must be faithful lest they fall also (1Cor 10:1ff.). Again, this is not a contrast but a parallel. The writer of Hebrews uses the same parallel in chapters three and four of his letter. The people were delivered, but they did not respond in faith/faithfulness, and their carcasses were scattered throughout the wilderness.

Peter is in line with the rest of the New Testament writers. Baptism brings a person into the saved people of God. This does not mean that each and every one of them is guaranteed that he/she will participate in the resurrection of the just. Each person must respond in faith to the hearing of the gospel (Heb 4:2).

The teaching of Peter here is not the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Baptism does not “infuse” something into you. But baptism is an effective covenant sign by which God declares that you are a part of his people. Once in, you must walk by faith so that you will inherit the promise. This is our hope and our responsibility.

BAPTISM AND ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

In the opening questions of Calvin’s Strasbourg catechism (1538-9), the child is asked:

Teacher: My child, are you a Christian in fact as well as in name?

Child: Yes, my father.

Teacher: How is this known to you?

Child: Because I am baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Calvin, the father of the Reformed tradition, is clearly attaching assurance to baptism. But why would Calvin have children memorize something like this in their instruction in the faith? Is he trying to give assurance to children where no assurance can be found? Or did he have a Scriptural reason for saying this? I believe rightly understood (i.e., kept within all of its proper contexts), our baptism can be one of the legs on the stool of assurance. As we will see, it cannot be the *only* leg on the stool. When people seek to make it the only leg it becomes false assurance. But the flip side of that coin is that if you take the leg completely out by keeping faith in the psychological realm, you may live in constant fear because you never really know if you have the right type of psychological faith. On top of that, you know that your heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. You might be deceiving yourself.

I want to discuss here how your baptism can be a comfort to your soul in times of doubt, anguish and fear concerning your salvation. I want to show you that assurance does not come

simply in the subjective realm (i.e., what I think, how I feel, etc.). But the objective reality of your baptism combined with other things is a means that God uses to assure you that you are indeed his and will inherit the promises. In order to accomplish this task, we must turn once again to an understanding of just what it means to be “in covenant” with God.

COVENANT (ONE MORE TIME!)

As you well know by now and as I have explained earlier in this paper, baptism finds its meaning in terms of God’s covenant. Baptism is a covenant sign and seal. For this reason, we cannot separate what baptism means from its context within the covenant. But what is the covenant?

While the covenant has been recognized among modern Reformed folks (especially in terms of infant baptism), in many ways the covenant has been marginalised or minimized and almost set aside. The focus in Reformed camps has been on the decrees of God. There is no problem in understanding that the decrees of God are there and are there for our comfort. But almost everything in Scripture is interpreted (by some) in terms of God’s secret decrees. But God explicitly states in Scripture that his decrees are secret. No one knows them but himself. What God has revealed is for us to understand and live out. This is precisely what Moses told the people of Israel in Deut. 29:29 “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” Basically, what is said here is that we should not try to figure out God’s secrets and then live by them. We seek to live by what God has revealed.

What God has revealed in terms of how he relates to people is that he gives himself to certain people, marks them off from the rest of the world by particular signs and seals, makes promises of blessing to them conditioned on their faithfulness and warns them of punishment for their unfaithfulness. The shorthand for this is *covenant*. As I pointed out earlier, far from being a mere legal arrangement, God speaks of his relationship with Israel in terms of marriage. God is her husband and Israel is his wife (cf. e.g., Hosea, Ezek 16; cf. also Jer 3:8). This is not a paper relationship that God has with his people. He is not that kind of husband. This is a real and intimate relationship in which God gives himself—his whole self—in love to his people.

Being in covenant with these people means that there are promises. These promises are given to his people to be inherited by them as they rely upon him and do what he says. For example, the promised land is the inheritance of God’s people during the Old Covenant era. As they trust their God and obey him, they will enter into and possess the land. If they fail to trust God and consequently disobey him they will not inherit the promise. God’s covenant is a relationship of responsibility. God has responsibilities to us, and we have responsibilities to him. God will be faithful to his promises. And he expects us to be faithful to the condition of the covenant.

At this point some will say, “Well, this is where we all fail. Not one of us is perfectly faithful to the conditions of the covenant.” While it is true that not one of us is perfect (i.e., without any moral blemish), that doesn’t mean that we are not faithful to the conditions of the covenant. You see, the covenant provides for the sins that we commit. Faithfulness to the demands of the covenant means that when we do sin—and we will—we will recognize that sin, confess it to God, forsake it and in that place we will find mercy. God is *faithful* and *just* to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1John 1:9). God’s *justice* is demonstrated when he forgives his confessing people because this is what he has promised. God

would be *unjust* if he refused to forgive his people when they confess their sins because this is what he has promised. But the promise of forgiveness is conditioned upon his people responding in faith to the promise and confessing their sins.

On the other side of the promise of blessing is the promise of punishment or curse. Even though a person may be in relationship with God, this does not give him a pass on the way that he lives. Being an heir of the promises of God does not mean that you have a “get out of hell free” card no matter how you respond to God’s love. There can be no presumption in this relationship. The promises of God are only realized by the people of God *by faith*. If God’s people don’t respond in faith, then they will suffer the *covenant* curses.

It is within this context and these various connections that we can begin to understand the issue of assurance and how our baptism relates to that assurance.

BAPTISM AND ASSURANCE

Baptism can only be properly understood within the context of this covenant. Baptism is the covenant sign and seal which marks off God’s people from the rest of the world and for God. But as soon as the word “sign” is mentioned, many immediately begin to think of an empty pointer. That is, the only relevance that the sign has is that of a visual, picturing something that God is *really* doing. While it is true that the sign itself (in this case water) is not the thing signified (in this case covenant standing), it is *not* true that it is a mere picture of reality. God’s signs are the means by which his powerful, creative, transformative word is applied. Baptism is an application of the word of God in water. Baptism is the covenant rite by which God vows to be our God and he takes us as his people. The water symbolizes the blood of Christ and the Holy Spirit to be sure. The water is not *in itself* the blood of Christ or the Holy Spirit. But the water is the declaration that we have been set apart by the blood of Christ (Heb 10:29) and been made partakers of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). How can this be? Because when you were baptized, you were baptized *into the name* of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19-20). You took on their *name*, which is more than a title that you wear. Taking on the name of God is like a wife taking the name of her husband. And that fact is rooted in God’s work of joining a man and his wife—Adam and Eve—and calling them “Adam” or “man.” Just as Eve took the name of her husband and was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh, so in baptism you take on the name of the Triune God.

Your baptism is primarily God’s declaration about you. Your baptism is *God’s* sign and seal that he has taken you to be his own. It is an objective declaration concerning you. It doesn’t matter if you are an infant who will have no memory of the physical baptism or an adult who is converted, this is God’s declaration about you. It doesn’t matter how you felt—whether you cried, felt happy or had little or no feeling—it remains God’s declaration about you. Therefore, in your baptism you are declared to be in covenant with God, taking on his name. This means that you are now an heir of the promises of God which are part of this covenant. All the promises given to Abraham are now yours in Christ because you have put on Christ in your baptism (Gal 3:27 and context). You have been baptized into his name, you have taken on the name of Christ. Because you are Christ’s you are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise. Abraham was promised that he would inherit the world (Rom 4:13). This is the promise for all those baptized into Christ. The promise of eternal life, resurrection, justification and glorification all belong to

you because you belong to him. This is what it means to be in covenant: you are an heir of the promises.

But it must be remembered that these promises are within the context of all of the terms of the covenant. They cannot be separated and put up on a shelf by themselves as if they stand alone. Being within the context of the covenant means that these promises are *conditional*. You will not inherit the promises if you do not respond in faith (i.e., a trust that is shown in faithfulness). You inherit the promises *by faith*. And if you do not respond in faith to the promises of God—trusting your own way—then you will be disinherited and will not enter the promised land, so to speak.

There has been much confusion over this issue because of the way we understand the promises of God. I am afraid that when we hear “promise”—especially a promise given to *me*—we are hearing “This is what God has decreed will happen no matter what.” In short, we have confused two categories: secret decree and promise. There is not a complete equality between God’s secret decree and God’s promises when it comes to individuals inheriting the promises. To be sure, God has decreed which people will inherit the promises, but that is not the same as saying that God has given you his promises. God’s promises are among those things that God has *revealed*. Exactly who will inherit those promises is among those things which God has *not revealed*. If you approach God’s promises from the angle of decree and not from the angle of what is revealed, then all sorts of texts will pose serious problems for you.

For instance, in Ezekiel we are told by God himself just how his promises work. We read in Ezekiel 33:12-19

And you, son of man, say to your people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. Though ***I say*** to the righteous that ***he shall surely live***, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, though ***I say*** to the wicked, ***'You shall surely die,'*** yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; ***he shall surely live***. "Yet your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not just,' when it is their own way that is not just. When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it. And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by them."

In both cases here God made strong promises: one to the “righteous” and one to the “wicked.” God says to the righteous, “You will surely live” (a strong form of oath in Hebrew). But if he then turns and begins to live in an unrighteous manner, he will die. On the other hand, God says to the wicked, “You shall surely die” (same oath form). But if he then turns from his wickedness and lives righteously, he will live. Now, if God’s promises are taken as his unalterable decree, then we have God contradicting himself. But if we take these promises within the context of what is revealed concerning his relationship with his people, then there is no contradiction.

This is something of the problem that Paul is dealing with in Romans. The main question that controls the whole book of Romans is this, “Has God been faithful?” That question takes on particular relevance in Paul’s letter when he deals with the unbelieving or unfaithful Jews in comparison with believing Gentiles who do not possess the law of God. The question comes in 3:3, “What if some were unfaithful? Does their unfaithfulness nullify the faithfulness of God?” And Paul’s strong answer is, “By no means! Let God be true and every man a liar.” God’s promises do not fall to the ground because the people to whom he has given them are unfaithful. This is what the statement means in that early Christian creed found in 2 Timothy 2:11-12: “The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; *if we are faithless, he remains faithful*- for he cannot deny himself.” This doesn’t mean, “It doesn’t matter whether or not you have faith, God will be faithful and you will inherit the promises anyway.” That’s an abomination! It means that God’s promises are true no matter how the people respond to whom the promises are given. God is faithful. He cannot deny himself. The promises of a husband are not invalid if his wife is unfaithful, even if he divorces her. That is the nature of the relationship. Those are the conditions of the covenant.

Now, what does all this have to do with baptism and its relationship with assurance? Well, it has everything to do with it. Baptism is the time at which God declares that you are in this covenant with him. It is the declaration to you that all of the promises belong to you. And as you walk by faith, you are *assured* that what God has promised will be yours. God will not fail to keep his covenant. You can know this because God told this to you personally when you were baptized into his name. Within the context of covenant faithfulness, your baptism should be a powerful means of assurance that you will inherit the promise, that you will participate in Christ’s glory at his coming and be a fellow-heir of the world. If God had not given you this specific word, how would you be assured? You may say, “Well I belong to Christ.” That is a right answer. But how do you know you belong to Christ? You may say, “I have faith.” That is also a good answer. But how do you know that your faith is real? Your answer may be, “Because it is demonstrated in my good works.” That is fine also. But how do you know that your good works are not merely the “plowing of the wicked”? How do you know that you are not living a life of self-deception? How do you know that you belong to God and that his promises belong to you?

God declares that *to you* in your baptism. There he told you that you belong to him, and he made personal application of his promises to you. Assurance of salvation is not something that is totally subjective. It is not just what goes on in our heads or how we interpret our works. And thank God it isn’t! You and I both know that we are quite capable of deceiving ourselves in all of these things. But God has given us his objective word in the waters of baptism to tell us that we do indeed belong to him. Because of that, we can know that our faith, as weak and as feeble as it sometimes is, is pleasing to God. And we can know that our works are accepted by God in Christ because God has declared that they are. We don’t have to wonder. Because of this we can approach God with full assurance of faith and know that he hears us because he has promised to hear us.

Baptism becomes an appeal to God in times of fear and doubt. You can indeed point to your baptism and appeal to God saying something to the effect of, “This is what you have promised, and I believe you. You have promised this to me, and I trust you.” This is, by the way, essentially what you read in the Psalms when the Psalmists are appealing to God’s justice. They are appealing to God for him to be faithful to his covenant. And you can do that also because

God has made promises to you. Playing its part within all of covenant life, baptism certainly is a means through which our hearts can be assured before God and the world that he will save us in the end.

There have been some objections to “looking to your baptism” for assurance. Some of the objections are reactions to the dangers that come from detaching baptism from the rest of the gospel. That is a real danger. There are some people who, after reading this, will have only heard the parts they want to hear. One of those parts might be, “Baptism is a means of assurance of salvation.” From there he may go out and begin to wave his baptism around as a “get out of hell free” card. But if a person does this he has misunderstood the whole discussion. Baptism cannot be separated from the context of the covenant as a whole. It cannot be singled out as *the* one and only means of assurance. But nothing within covenant living can be singled out like this as *the one and only* means of assurance. Try to put faith on the shelf all by itself as the only means of assurance and you will hear the repudiation of James. Try to put works on the shelf all by itself as the only means of assurance and you may be nothing more than an altruistic atheist. Not one of these means of assurance is all by itself. They all work together to produce the assurance that we so desperately need in times of doubt. Our baptism is used rightly as a means of assurance when it is joined with faith/faithfulness. We know that our faith/faithfulness is accepted by God because God has declared that we belong to him.

I am not naïve. I do know that people will abuse this type of understanding. People will presume upon God. But that in itself is nothing new. The Jews looked to their particular signs as assurance of salvation apart from faithfulness. It was wrong then, and it is wrong now. But this does not mean that, for instance, the sign of circumcision was of no profit at all to the Jews. Paul says to the contrary, “For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision” (Rom 2:25). While it is wrong to look to the sign *alone*, it is not wrong to look to the sign. God said something there that you need to hear and that can assure your heart. Instead of being a means of presumption, baptism can be and should be a means of fear for the unfaithful. They should understand that there are two sides of this covenant, and God is just as faithful to the punishment side of the covenant as he is the blessing side of the covenant.

Another objection that is raised is that of looking to your baptism means that you are not looking to Christ. In the context of God’s promises, that raises a false dilemma. Your baptism is baptism into Christ (cf. Matt 28:19-20; Rom 6:3-4). When you look to your baptism you should be looking to that which God has promised you in Christ and because of Christ. Again, we cannot begin to take one thing over against another in this covenant as if all of these things are opposing forces to one another (e.g., you are either looking to Christ or you are looking to your baptism). God’s word in Christ is given to you in baptism. These two things are not enemies but friends.

Still yet another objection to “looking to your baptism” as a means of assurance might be that we have no Scriptural proof that any one of the Biblical authors ever said, “Look to your baptism.” I agree that this is never said explicitly, “Look to your baptism.” But there are times that the people of God are pointed to their baptism for various reasons. Paul points the Romans to their baptism in chapter six of his letter. He does with the Galatians in chapter three. He does so with the Corinthians in chapter twelve of his first letter. Peter does so in his first epistle in chapter three. And, I believe, the author of Hebrews does so in chapter ten when he says that we

have had our bodies washed with pure water (10:22) This, for the author of Hebrews, is one reason that we can draw near to God with a true heart and full assurance of faith.

But there are two sections of Scripture that deal with assurance, and neither one of them mentions baptism explicitly. These two sections are 2Peter 1 and 1John. But in 2Peter 1 Peter is writing to those to whom great and precious promises are given (1:3). He is writing to the people of God who have already been baptized. It is to the promises given to them that they are to give all diligence to cultivate good works. 1John is also a letter written to the church, community of the baptized. Their faith/faithfulness is tested against several standards. This is how they know that they truly know him.

Joined with faithful living, the covenant sign of baptism becomes an anchor for the soul. It is nothing less than God's word being applied to you. And in times when you have confessed your sins and you are struggling to live right but you are still having doubts and fears, look back to what God declared about you in your baptism. His word is true. You belong to him.

BAPTISM AND UNITY

It is of course no secret that the issue of Christian baptism has been a point of controversy in many churches and denominations. Lines have been drawn in the sand, accusations of heresy have been common, long standing relationships have been ruptured and theological camps have been set up within the church. Divisions have been exacerbated by self-proclaimed champions of the gospel who essentially anathematize everyone who doesn't agree with them at every point. Some of these refuse to listen to the church's rebukes because those churches are apostate ... so the champion declares *ex cathedra*. In a zeal to champion and protect the gospel in all of this debate, many within the larger church have lived contrary to the gospel. People have set up their own interpretations of particular passages of Scripture and their own dogmatic opinions as the tests of orthodoxy and fellowship. And while we wrangle and fight, devouring one another with our words, spreading our problems all over the world-wide-web, the world watches and laughs.

No one that I know of in this whole debate within the Reformed church has denied the gospel. Those people who believe that God actually gives what he promises at baptism still believe that Jesus Christ and his work are the only ground of salvation and that the "alone instrument" of receiving the full benefits of Christ's work is faith. Those people who believe that baptism is nothing more than a naked sign that points to a greater reality still believe that Jesus Christ and his work are the only ground of salvation and that the "alone instrument" of receiving the full benefits of Christ's work is faith. And while we divide over the efficaciousness of baptism we miss one of the main points that baptism loudly proclaims: we are all one in Christ Jesus. It is quite funny—in a sad sort of way—that the very thing that points to our unity is the thing that is causing great division.

While zeal to protect the gospel must be commended, misguided zeal must be corrected. We must always be careful to protect that which has been entrusted to the church. But we must also be wise to distinguish between what is a fight for orthodoxy and what is an intramural debate. Since the gospel is not being denied, this is an intramural debate. We must treat it as such. And, ironically, we should look to our baptism to encourage us to treat it as such.

This part of the paper is not to say, “Everybody must agree with this side of the debate or that side of the debate.” This is not a time to brow beat anyone into uniformity. Quite the opposite. In this section I will say that no matter what our disagreements within this pale of orthodoxy, we live in something bigger that demands we continue to strive to love one another as a family. We don’t have to agree on every incidental point to have fellowship with one another. And what God says in our baptism demands that we strive for this unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There are two ways that baptism points us to our unity within the body of Christ. The first is a matter of who we are. The second is a matter of what we are called to do.

BAPTISM MAKES AN OBJECTIVE DECLARATION

One thing that I have emphasized throughout this paper is that in baptism an objective declaration is being made about the person being baptized. Actually, in general terms, this statement is without much debate. All would agree within the Reformed community (to my knowledge) that baptism is the solemn rite of entrance into the church. So, at the least, we all agree that baptism objectively brings you into the church. (Even when I was a Baptist it was understood that baptism was the “door” to the church. Membership could only come through baptism.) We may disagree about what all God declares in baptism or what that declaration means precisely, but we do agree that an objective declaration is made.

Earlier I discussed this more at length when I spoke about what it means to be baptized “into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” In your baptism God declared that you are in covenant with him. Being baptized into his name is not a meaningless or empty ritual that we go through simply because we are commanded to do something. We are commanded by Jesus to baptize the disciples “into the name” because this is the effective sign in which God declares that this person no longer belongs to the world but to him. Baptism is a covenant ritual in which a person’s status in relation to God changes. This doesn’t mean that the water has some inherent power in it or that something magical is going on in the water. It simply means that God attaches his word to the water and declares that a person is in a particular relationship with himself.

The fact that these types of rituals make *real* changes in status is not something that is foreign to us at all. Marriage ceremonies and the declarations made there make *real* changes. It is not because they are magical. It is because they are covenant ceremonies. Before the ceremony/covenant ritual (whatever form that takes) a man is not-a-husband. After the ceremony (or at the end of the ceremony) the declaration is made and the presentation follows that this man and this woman are *now* husband and wife. And so in baptism you are declared to be in union with the Holy Trinity. That is what it means to be baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

You are in covenant with God. But this covenant into which you enter in baptism is not a individual-only covenant. That is, it is not a covenant that God makes with you and you alone. Through baptism you have entered into the covenant that has been made with Christ and his church. The covenant is with you *only* as you are a part of his people. You don’t come to faith and baptize yourself. You are baptized by the church (at least you are supposed to be). Baptism is not an individual ordinance. That is, it is not something that anyone can do without the authorization of the church. Baptism is a church ordinance. It is given to the church to perform.

And it is given to the church to perform for a reason which says volumes about how our relationship with God is characterized.

It is common within the popular evangelical world today to speak about having a personal relationship with God. And within our cultural context this phrase has much unbiblical baggage. The predominant modern thought (though maybe not expressed this way explicitly) basically runs like this: I have my own relationship with God. While the church is helpful, it is not in any way necessary to my personal salvation. I can make it just fine without it. The thought is that God has made a personal pact with me. Whether or not I am part of the church is a secondary issue in the grand scheme of things. I am only responsible to others in a very superficial way. My relationships with them do not matter in things that are ultimate. I am supposed to be nice to other people because that is what people do who have personal relationships with Jesus. But as far as going to heaven when I die, that is a solo flight. In this way of thinking (again maybe not explicitly stated but certainly lived out), God does not have *a covenant*—the New Covenant—he has covenants; i.e., with each individual.

This type of thinking has led to many extremes. Many of us in the Reformed branch of the church are not guilty of some of these extremes. But I can't say that we are totally free from this type of thinking either. Anytime we begin to think of salvation or our relationship with God outside of the context of the church, we have slipped into an unbiblical way of thinking. Why is this? What is the problem with that type of thinking? The problem is that God has made *one* covenant—the New Covenant (as it is now called). This *one* covenant that God has made he has made with his people in Christ Jesus, the Israel of God, the church. He does not make a separate covenant with each individual. It is *the church*, says Paul in Eph. 5:25, that Jesus died for. And you can only say that Jesus died for you as you are a part of that covenant community for which Jesus died. In fact, before God formed this community (and before you were a part of it), the people were just a mass of nameless, faceless individuals. Once you were not a people, says Peter quoting Hosea, but now you are the people of God (cf. 1Pe 3:10). Now your identity is one with this group called “the people of God.” Now your personal identity is understood in terms of your relationship to this special people called “God’s people.” Your personal relationship must always be understood within the context of this covenant. You are not a free floating molecule in the universe connected “only and solely to God.”

Each person within the covenant has a personal relationship with God. But it is only within the context of this covenant that a person enjoys this personal relationship. You cannot have a personal relationship apart from this one covenant. Each person within this covenant has personal responsibilities to respond in obedience to God. But even that obedience of faith is only accepted in Christ, and to be in Christ is to be a part of his body, the church. The church being incidental in the whole scheme of salvation or only a help to me along the way is a thought that is totally foreign to the whole of Scripture.

The Westminster divines recognized this also and said this about the importance of being a member of the church:

WCF 25.2 The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, *out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.*

The church is not just a nice little add-on for my personal encouragement. The church is that group of people that will be saved. And you will be saved as an individual *as you are a part of that church*, the body of Christ. So, when you enter this one covenant that God has made with his people in Christ, you are joined not just to God personally but to all those other people in this covenant also. This relationship is not simply a superficial self-help group. This is that community which God declares to be his own. These are the people who all belong to one family with God as their Father and Jesus Christ as their elder brother.

The effective sign that says you are a part of that family which prays “*our Father*” is baptism. It says that you are now a member of this family. This is now your status: you are a family member. Because of this our oneness or our unity is objective. What I mean by objective is that it is a fact that is not dependent upon what you think or feel about the situation. For example, your membership in your family is objective. You are a son or a daughter no matter what you think or feel about it. Something being objective stands in contrast to something being subjective. Being subjective is something that is based upon personal feelings, tastes or thoughts. Subjectively in order for something to be real it must be real to the person who is feeling or thinking. For example, If I don’t feel like you’re my friend, then you are not my friend. There may not be any hard evidence, we might say, that a person can pull up. Everything about a particular relationship is determined by what goes on in a person’s mind or emotions. And while I am not totally satisfied with the words objective and subjective, they are the best I have to deal with the situation right now.

Our unity as the people of God is something that we can say is objective. Why? Because it is something that does not depend upon what we feel or what we think. Our objective unity as the people of God is dependent upon the declaration of God about us as his people. It is about what God has declared about us in our baptism. He has said that we are his people, united together in him. This is, in grammatical terms, an indicative, a statement of fact. Just as you can say, “I am married,” so you can say, “I am a part of the people of God.”

Understanding this reality can be extremely helpful in your personal walk as a Christian. You can begin to relate to people in terms of things you can know as opposed to impressions. How many people have judged another person’s relationship with God based upon whether or not his spirit agrees with the other person’s spirit? How arrogant is it to set yourself and your emotions up as the final arbiter of salvation?! As I will point out later, this does not mean that you overlook wickedness in others and say, “Well, he’s baptized, so I can’t say anything to him about his wickedness. I must consider him my brother no matter what and tolerate his wickedness.” In fact, the opposite is true. It is an abominable wickedness to tolerate evil in the name of unity. BUT, while we cannot tolerate evil, it must also be recognized that we can’t say, “I feel that this guy is not saved. So I don’t have to deal with him as a brother. He’s not my brother.” When we deal with unfaithful baptized people, we deal with them as unfaithful *brothers*. We are in the same family because God has declared it. Until God declares otherwise, we must deal with them as family members.

The covenant is not only a position of privilege that we have (although it is a tremendous privilege), but is also an obligation to act in particular ways.

BAPTISM OBLIGATES US TO PARTICULAR BEHAVIOR

When God declares, “I am your God, you are my people,” there is always added to this, in some form or fashion, “therefore you are to live this way.” This is what we see at the giving of the law at Sinai. God declares that he is their God who has delivered them from the land of Egypt the house of bondage. Because of this they are to keep his law. God’s gracious covenant demands grateful obedience from us. To put this in grammatical terms again, the indicative leads to the imperative. Because of who you are and/or because of what God has done for you, you are therefore to act in this particular way.

We are dealing with the subject of unity. And, as I have already stated, the unity of God’s people is objective. Just like you can say, “My wife, my children and I are a family,” so you can say, “Those who are baptized into the name of the Triune God are my family.” That fact is the foundation for the way we are supposed to be acting toward other family members. This is not a mere deduction from a particular text or texts. This is the way we see Paul dealing with a number of congregations to which he writes. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (as I have explained earlier) deals with the problem of factions in the church. The people were not acting toward one another as they ought to have done. Specifically, people were dividing up behind specific personalities, creating their own little subsets in the church. Paul’s appeal to them was this, “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?” (1 Cor 1:13). Paul appeals to their common relationship with Christ. “Christ is not divided and neither should you be!”

When Paul writes to the Ephesian church, though the problems don’t seem to be as stark as they are in Corinth, Paul appeals to the unity created in Christ as the foundation for striving for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (cf. 4:3). The discussion that really characterizes the first few chapters of Ephesians (esp. chap. 2) is that Jew and Gentile have been made one in Christ Jesus. The calling into this family is the calling of which Paul speaks in 4:1 where he says, “I ... urge you to walk worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” There is an objective calling to which the Ephesians have been called. They are the people of God. Now, because of that objective calling, their covenant status, they are to walk worthy of that calling. There is a particular lifestyle that is to characterize those who live in this relationship. Specifically, in chapter four Paul maintains that they are to bear with one another, loving one another, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. He then goes back to the foundation for this one more time when he lists those seven pillars of the church, one of which is “one baptism.” The point is once again that the fact of your status is the basis for exhortation to live out what is already true about you. Or, to put it simply, Paul is saying, “Be who you are.” You *are* one body, now work that out and act like one body.

It is not enough to say, “We are united objectively, and that is enough.” Covenant reality cannot be used as a cop-out for avoidance of covenant responsibility. The covenant reality of unity is the reason to strive to be unified in very visible and tangible ways. If there was a family in your particular church which was in complete disarray—the father is an adulterer, the wife an adulterous, the children in rebellion and they are all living in different houses—I pray to God that you wouldn’t say, “Well, at least they are a family.” While it is true that they are a family, they are not acting the way a family should act. Indeed, their being a family makes their actions all the more heinous. The church would intervene and try to help the family *be* a family. That is, we would step in and exhort and encourage them to repent of their sins and begin to live faithfully as

a family. We would tell them just what Paul was telling those churches, “You *are* a family, now work that out and act like a family. So it is in the church. When we see people in sin it is a cop out to say, “I never thought he was in the family anyway.” We have a responsibility to seek the restoration of the brother through repentance.

Unity being covenantal says something about the nature of our striving for unity. Striving for unity does not mean that we are to tolerate wickedness. When people jump to this conclusion—“If every baptized person is my brother, then that means I have to compromise with his wickedness”—they are thinking that unity can somehow be isolated and set over against the other aspects of covenant life. That is, it might be thought that unity is to be acted out without qualification. But this is not true. Covenant union requires us to exhort and encourage unfaithful brothers. And if they remain unfaithful, the church is to ***objectively declare*** them to be non-brothers through excommunication. But just like baptism, excommunication is something that is done by the *church*. It is not the individual judgment of an individual believer. You cannot personally excommunicate anyone. These people are a part of the family until they are officially kicked out.

Even if churches are not faithful in carrying out this responsibility, baptism gives you a foundation for dealing with another person. If they have not been baptized, you can deal with them in one way. They are people who need to hear the gospel, trust Christ and become a part of his people according to his command. If they have been baptized, you can deal with them in another way. There is some overlap between the two, but you have a much stronger point of reference when the person has been baptized. You can tell the person, “In your baptism God declared that you belong to him. Belonging to God is a special privilege that comes with tremendous responsibilities. Let’s open the word of *our* God and see what *our* responsibilities are.” Then you can call this person to faith in Christ, because if he is *un-faith-ful* he needs to begin living by faith and, as our Larger Catechism speaks about, improving his baptism. The conversation moves out of the realm of your “impressions” v. his “impressions.” His impressions are that he has a good, personal relationship with Jesus. Your impressions are that he doesn’t. He likes his impressions more than he likes your impressions. I am not saying that this will “work” every time. This is not about pragmatic witnessing and canned presentations. But it is about pointing to something that a baptized person knows about. He has been baptized. That leaves the realm of the subjective and enters the objective. Striving for unity involves dealing with these unfaithful brothers. And baptism is a good place to start. Paul did it.

Sometimes this unfaithfulness may be a person isolating himself and setting himself against the body of Christ, refusing to live together in unity. This person can also be appealed to on the basis of his baptism (and should be); once again, just as Paul did it in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians. He should be told that he cannot strike out on his own without being in danger. As a member of the family he must work to live like a family member in Christ should live. All of this doesn’t mean that we won’t have different opinions or different interpretations of particular passages of Scripture. We will. If we don’t, someone is probably not thinking too much. We won’t be sharpened if people just fall in without thinking. Looking to our baptism means that we realize that there is something bigger than both of us that unites us together. Because of that we must strive to work out our differences or learn to live with them. One problem that we have in the modern church in America is that we are not forced to work these things out as many have had to do in past times. Many of these churches to whom Paul wrote did not have the option of going down the street to the other Christian church. There was one Christian church to which

they could go. That was the only church. So they had to work it out. We are more mobile and a lot more divided in our world. We are able to go from here to there quite easily. We don't have to learn to live with differences and learn to relate to people as Christians who have different opinions that fall within the realm of orthodoxy. We can just pick up and drive down the street.

Let me say here that there are legitimate reasons for leaving a particular church and going to another particular church. We live in a messy world with complicated problems. Everything is not always black and white. You can't say "You should never leave a church." But there should be a lot more struggle with doing so than is commonly done in the evangelical world. The relative ease with which people exchange churches is symptomatic of some serious problems in the church. Maybe another church needs help that you can give. Maybe there are some theological differences that are insurmountable and will cause unhappy divisions. These *may* be reasons to leave, but they may not necessitate leaving. These are things that should be thought through with great care. One thing that should always be true is that we should stay in a church or leave a church with animosity. What God has declared in our baptism exhorts us against this.

Baptism both declares our unity and, on that basis, exhorts us to unity. The church, as imperfect as she is, is still God's people, Christ's bride, the temple where the Spirit abides in glory and the holy nation of God. What we must strive to do in the power of the Spirit is to beautify the church by reflecting the unity of God as the people of God.