

DO I BELIEVE IN BAPTISMAL REGENERATION?

By Rich Lusk

Introduction

I appreciate Andy Webb's recent entry into the current discussion over baptismal efficacy.[1] This is an issue which has consumed a great deal of time and energy in the Reformed world in recent years. It is not likely to subside soon.

As a contributing party to the discussion, I read Webb's article with great interest.[2]

I commend Webb for his zeal in defending his convictions. He understands that a great deal is at stake in our differing baptismal theologies. I also appreciate his moderated rhetoric. His work was entirely devoid of name calling and mud slinging. In that respect, it represents a great leap forward in the debate, and many of Webb's elder counterparts would do well to emulate his tone. Frankly, in reading Webb's piece, I was surprised (and gratified) at how much ground he was willing to concede to those he opposes in this intramural Reformed discussion. He understands, better than many, that there have been a variety of positions on baptismal efficacy under the umbrella of Reformed Christianity. I am responding to Webb because I think he has misunderstood my position and this is an opportunity to provide clarification. In some ways, I hope to show that Webb and I are not as far apart as he supposes; in other ways, I hope to show that his arrows have simply missed their target because he does not understand what I (and others) have written. I also hope to show that my views on baptism are well within the mainstream of the Reformed confessional tradition.

What is Baptismal Regeneration?

To cut to the chase, let me begin by asking: *Have I espoused a form of baptismal regeneration? Is baptismal regeneration being taught in the Reformed community?* Webb begins and ends his essay arguing that baptismal regeneration simply isn't Reformed. Webb quotes John "Rabbi" Duncan, to the effect that "baptismal regeneration" is simply incompatible with the principles of Calvinism:

In a letter to Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great 19th century Scottish Presbyterian Pastor and Theologian John "Rabbi" Duncan wrote, regarding the concept of baptismal regeneration, "Horrible as the doctrine of baptismal regeneration is, it would be still more so if combined with those scriptural principles which are usually called Calvinism."

What exactly is the doctrine in question? What do baptismal regenerationists teach? What is the essence of their error? Webb relies on Charles Hodge for his definition:

The doctrine of baptismal regeneration, that is, the doctrine that inward spiritual renovation always attends baptism rightly administered to the unresisting, and that regeneration is never effected without it, is contrary to Scripture, subversive of evangelical religion, and opposed to universal experience. It is, moreover, utterly irreconcilable with the doctrine of the Reformed churches. For that doctrine teaches that all the regenerated are saved. "Whom God calls them he also glorifies," Romans 8:30. It is, however, plain from Scripture, and in accordance with the faith of the universal church, that multitudes of the baptized perish. The baptized, therefore, as such, are not the regenerated.

Hodge's definition includes three basic components that need careful analysis:

[1] Inward spiritual renovation *always* accompanies the right administration of baptism.

[2] Regeneration is *never* effected without baptism (with the implication that all the unbaptized, including infants, perish).

[3] Many of the baptized obviously perish, meaning that not all who are regenerated persevere into final glorification.

Actually, I do not hold any of these three tenets. In my writings on baptism, I have attempted to steer clear of these errors (and, with Webb, I do in fact consider them to be serious errors). I should also add that I have only rarely used “baptismal regeneration” language, and generally when it shows up in my writings, it is in a quotation from an early Reformer (like Calvin or Bucer) who used the terminology quite differently from nineteenth century Reformed theologians, as we shall see. I have no desire to insist on “baptismal regeneration” language, and I understand the confusion that attends it. With those caveats in view, let us look at each one of Hodge’s tenets in turn.

[1] I do not believe that everyone who is baptized has a “permanently transformed heart” or “a new principle of life communicated to the soul.” In fact, while affirming what Hodge’s doctrine of regeneration intends to protect (divine monergism and the gift-nature of faith), I would suggest a somewhat different understanding of “regeneration” is possible. The term “regeneration” has some flexibility, both in the Bible and in church history (including Reformed theology). Before accepting or condemning any particular version of “baptismal regeneration” as orthodox or heretical, we need to make clear just what “regeneration” means in a given context.

What is “regeneration”? In terms of biblical theology, the term seems to refer to the nexus of three eschatological lines of development within the biblical story. Regeneration is [1] the new state of affairs inaugurated by Christ, otherwise known as the kingdom of God; [2] the new age on the redemptive-historical timeline, sometimes referred to as the messianic age or the new covenant epoch; and [3] the new community or new humanity that belongs to this new kingdom and age, called the church. The term “regeneration” partakes of the already/not yet dynamic of New Testament biblical theology in general: the regeneration is already present, but not yet consummated. The term “regeneration” can be used both objectively and subjectively, though the biblical emphasis falls on the objective. Objectively considered, we can affirm a doctrine of “baptismal regeneration” without getting into the problems Hodge identifies; subjectively, “baptismal regeneration” can only be affirmed in an extremely attenuated sense, if at all (we’ll see that subjectively, the term has been used in different ways as well, to refer to new life in the church, the beginning of life-long sanctification, or, in Hodge’s sense of a secret, irreversible work of God in the soul of an elect person).

First, consider “baptismal regeneration” in an objective sense. If I were going to speak of “baptismal regeneration,” I would define “regeneration” as the new life situation entered into in baptism. This new life, in this carefully specified sense, is not so much a matter of ontology or subjectivity (Hodge’s focus), as it a matter of new relationships, privileges, and responsibilities. It means one has a new family and a new story, a new citizenship and a new status. It means something objective has been changed, though subjectively one must still respond in faith, of course. Life in the regeneration, in this

sense, is not strictly limited to the elect.

A good biblical case can be made for this objective understanding of regeneration. The “regeneration” of Mt. 19:28 (and Tit. 3:5, I would suggest) is clearly not an “inward spiritual renovation” but the new state of affairs brought about in the kingdom of God. This is especially evident in the Matthean text: the regeneration is something the disciples will enter into, not something that will enter into them. It seems Jesus’ language is eschatological: he’s referring to the messianic age, in which his disciples will begin ruling with him (cf. Dan. 7). The “regeneration” in this sense is simply the new creation of the church.[3] To be baptized is to enter into the church (WCF 28.1), which is “kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, outside of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (WCF 25.2). This new standing in the kingdom, house, and family constitutes “regeneration.”[4]

This does not exclude a subjective regeneration in the ontological sense Hodge used the term. And if subjective regeneration is in view, I would *not* affirm “baptismal regeneration.” Indeed such an inner transformation is a secret of the heart and God’s decree and cannot be known with absolutely certainty by us.

But “baptismal regeneration” in an objective sense amounts to what has sometimes been called “ecclesial regeneration,” and this seems to steer clear of the problems commonly associated with the terminology.

Ecclesial regeneration is really a claim about the church as much as it is a claim about baptism. It focuses on the nature of the community one enters in baptism. The church is the “new thing” God has done, the new creation, the new society, the one new man in which Jew and Gentile have been brought together in Christ. Baptism, as the Westminster Standards teach, makes one a member of the church – of this new community. That is quite a different claim than asserting that each and every person baptized has a “permanent, irreversible principle of life communicated to the soul” or something of that nature.

Thus, in this alternative theological lexicon, “baptismal regeneration” does not necessarily mean what Hodge and Webb take it to mean. The language can be used in more than one way, objectively and subjectively, ecclesially or individually.

This makes discussion difficult, but we must understand each speaker on his own terms. In general, I have avoided “baptismal regeneration” language for just this reason.

The term “regeneration” has been very fluid in church history, and this accounts for some of the problems. In the early church, it was simply synonymous with baptism. Baptism was regarded as the beginning of one’s “new life” in Christ. For the early Reformers, like Calvin, regeneration was not an instantaneous event, but the entire life long process of renewal, commencing in baptism and reaching completion in glorification.

Calvin defines regeneration in the *Institutes*:

I interpret repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God . . . we are restored by this regeneration through the benefit of Christ into the righteousness of God . . . And indeed this restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples, renewing all their minds to true purity that they may practice repentance throughout their lives and know that this warfare will only end at death” (3.3.9).

For Calvin, regeneration is the beginning of sanctification. Regeneration is not prior to faith; it is by faith: “Now both repentance and forgiveness of sins--that is, newness of life and free reconciliation--are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith” (3.3.1; cf. Belgic Confession 24 and Col. 2:12: “raised with Him through faith . . .”).

Calvin then ties regeneration and baptism together:

For as God, regenerating us in baptism, ingrafts us into the fellowship of his Church, and makes us his by adoption, so we have said that he performs the office of a provident parent, in continually supplying the food by which he may sustain and preserve us in the life to which he has begotten us by his word (4.17.1).

But surely this Calvinian form of “baptismal regeneration” would not fall under the condemnation of Duncan and Hodge. Calvin has in view something objectively presented in baptism and subjectively received by faith. But this isn’t to be identified with Hodge’s irreversible inward renewal or new life-principle communicated to the soul. Elsewhere, in his *Antidote to the Counsel of Trent*, Calvin wrote,

That this may be more clear, let my readers call to mind that there is a two-fold grace in baptism, for therein both remission of sins and regeneration are offered to us. We teach that full remission is made, but that regeneration is only begun, and goes on making progress during the whole of life (1.5).

Calvin believed baptism was an objective, effectual means of salvation, but it did not guarantee salvation. In fact, baptism only blessed those who received it (subjectively) in faith. Again, the “regeneration” Calvin has in view is not identical to Hodge’s definition of the same term. Baptism is a good faith *offer* of new life, but the grace of baptism isn’t necessarily irresistible.

Calvin also wrote in reply to Westphal, “We hold, then, that baptism being a spiritual washing and a sign of our regeneration, serves as an evidence that God introduces us into his Church to make us, as it were, his children and heirs.” He writes that the “ordinary method in which God accomplishes our salvation is by beginning it in baptism and carrying it gradually forward during the course of life.” He says in his Geneva Catechism that in baptism, we find, “First, forgiveness of sins; and secondly, spiritual regeneration is figured by it.” Baptism is a sign or figure or symbol of regeneration; but God’s signs are not empty: “I understand it to be a figure, but still so that the reality is annexed to it; for God does not disappoint us when he promises us his gifts. Accordingly, it is certain that both pardon of sins and newness of life are offered to us in baptism and received by us.” In other words, regeneration is not only symbolized in baptism; it is held out, to be received by faith.

In explaining just what is at stake in his debate over baptism, he writes, “Let the readers therefore remember, that we are not here disputing whether it is necessary to baptize infants, nor calling in question whether by baptism they are ingrafted into the body of Christ, nor whether it is to them a laver of regeneration, nor whether it seals the pardon of their sins. The only question is the absolute necessity of Baptism” (see pages 87, 153-5, 320 in the 2002 Christian Focus edition of his Treatises). In other words, Calvin is in agreement with those who teach baptism is the means by which one is united to Christ, regenerated, and pardoned.

For later Reformed scholastics after Dordt (1618-19), the meaning of the term “regeneration” narrowed to the moment of God’s initiating grace in a person’s

life, resulting in life-long faith and repentance. It became almost exclusively subjective and individual, rather than corporate and cosmic. Whereas Calvin and the Belgic Confession could tie together the objective and subjective, and speak of regeneration *by faith* (with the understanding that faith itself was a divine gift and the means by which one entered into a new life in the covenant community), now regeneration came to be seen as the very source of faith. Such a shift in terminology was necessitated by the Arminian controversy. But of course, this also meant that the Reformed scholastics of the day had to jettison the earlier “baptismal regeneration” language of the Reformers. It no longer made good theological sense to speak of “baptismal regeneration” since no one wanted to suggest that baptism guaranteed perseverance or final salvation. The close connection between baptism and regeneration in Calvin’s soteriology was severed and any notion of “objective regeneration” was lost. Of course, Hodge’s understanding and use of the term “regeneration” stems more from Dordt than from Calvin.

In more recent biblical theology, “regeneration” has regained its full redemptive-historical overtones. Texts such as Mt. 19:28 and Tit. 3:5 have been read with their pregnant eschatological dimensions, in a more objective sense. Reformed writers such as Norm Shepherd, Peter Leithart, and Joel Garver have used “baptismal regeneration” language in this broader sense to describe entry into the “new creation” or the “new humanity.”[5] But, again, it is understood that baptism does not secure final glorification; rather it marks someone’s initiation into the church, with all its attendant privileges and responsibilities. It is an objective offer of “new life” and “new status” that must be received by faith in order to culminate in final salvation.

So “baptismal regeneration” has been a moving target in Reformed history. The terminology hasn’t been standing still. Of course, different meanings of the term can be used with great profit and truth in a given context. But it would be improper to insist that we freeze the meaning of the term to just one time period or branch of the historical church.[6] “Baptismal regeneration” may be orthodox or heretical; we must ask precisely what the speaker means when he employs the terms. To see this, all one has to do is compare Calvin and Hodge.

The priority of God’s grace is not in question here. Salvation is a gift, from beginning to end, inclusive of all the means (even faith!) needed to reach that end. I am quite comfortable with using “regeneration” terminology in a variety of ways (e.g., to refer to a person’s new nature), some compatible with “baptismal regeneration” and others not. But I have been careful to spell out that “baptismal regeneration” in the sense I have been using the term (which, again, is rare anyway) is not the same as “regeneration” in later Reformed scholastics such as Hodge. By the definition of “baptismal regeneration” that Webb seems to have in view, I am most certainly *not* a baptismal regenerationist.

[2] In my writing on baptism, I have been careful that to state that baptism is God’s ordinary means of bringing people into the new creation/regeneration, understood objectively in terms of WCF 25.2’s description of the church as kingdom/house/family. But baptism is not absolutely necessary to salvation. There may be, and in fact are, various exceptions to WCF 25.2’s claim that no salvation is found outside the community of the baptized. For example, a child of the covenant who dies before receiving baptism dies under the provisions of the promise. We know that God’s covenantal *intention* was to publicly and formally adopt that child as his own in the waters of baptism. In the providence of God, that possibility was precluded. But we dare not pit God’s promises against God’s providence. In a case such as this, the promise simply

comes to fulfillment in a different way. I am not advocating a cookie-cutter *ordo salutis* that makes baptism indispensable in any and every situation.

Of course, our Confession wisely takes note of just these sorts of circumstances. While the confession is silent regarding the death of covenant infants,[7] it does make provision for the extraordinary possibility of salvation outside of the “new creation” of the visible church (note the use of “ordinarily” in 25.2). Baptism is the door to the church. It is the way into the kingdom and family of God. But we should not apply this rigidly or mechanically. There can be exceptions, ordered by God’s own providence. The same Word of God that warranted baptism warrants us to believe that God has taken the child to be with him in glory.[8] In other cases, adult believers may die unbaptized due to extenuating circumstances; and again, we need not fear that the Judge of all the earth will fail to do what is right.

Calvin understood precisely this point in regard to the *ordinary* necessity of baptism for salvation, and the *extraordinary* possibility of salvation apart from baptism. In his *Antidote*, he says,

We, too, acknowledge that the use of Baptism is necessary--that no one may omit it from either neglect or contempt. In this way we by no means make it free [that is, optional]. And not only do we strictly bind the faithful to the observance of it, but we also maintain that it is the ordinary instrument of God in washing and renewing us; in short, in communicating to us salvation. The only exception we make is, that the hand of God must not be tied down to the instrument. He may of himself accomplish salvation. For when an opportunity for Baptism is wanting, the promise of God alone is amply sufficient (7.5).

To put it another way, while God may not be bound by his external ordinances, for all practical purposes, we *are* so bound. But there is certainly not a one-to-one relationship between regeneration (at least in Hodge’s sense) and baptism. We must take into account the situational perspective.

[3] Because “regeneration” may have other definitions than just the “inward spiritual renovation” of an individual’s heart, it does not have to function in an *ordo salutis* in the way Hodge envisions. While Hodge’s emphasis on God’s sovereign grace is entirely correct, many in the Reformed tradition have wanted to keep a link between baptism and regeneration. But even then, no one asserts that baptism is a complete and entire salvation all by itself, apart from the faithful response of the one baptized. Baptism is not a “get out of hell free” card, come what may. Baptism does not belong to an unbreakable “golden chain of salvation.” In fact, as I’ve pointed out before, I know of no recognizably orthodox theologian in the history of the church in any of its branches who has argued that baptism saved a person no matter how he lived subsequent to baptism. Thus, I am not at all clear who Hodge is seeking to refute.[9] Certain definitions of “regeneration” may necessitate the view that “all the regenerated are saved,” and will therefore exclude any version of baptismal regeneration. But those definitions should not be privileged over other Reformed definitions which leave open the possibility of apostasy or view regeneration as an extended process (e.g., Calvin’s definition of “regeneration” as life-long renewal beginning at baptism rather than Hodge’s secret inception of permanent new life).

For example, in the Old Covenant, Saul received a “new heart” and became a “new man” (1 Sam 10). In *some sense*, surely we can say he was regenerate. And yet he apostatized and will not be glorified at the last day. In the New Covenant, Paul tells the Corinthians they are temples of God. The Spirit indwells them. In *some sense*, surely we can refer to them as regenerate. And yet Paul holds forth the very real possibility that some of them may apostatize (1 Cor. 10).

In the parable of the soils, Jesus speaks of those who received the word with joy and sprang to new life, but later withered away under the heat of persecution. Surely, there was regeneration in *some general sense*.

To summarize, then, the version of “baptismal regeneration” I have advocated (and, to repeat myself, by no means would I insist on that terminology) is not the one that Hodge refutes. Or to put it another way, if we use the theological dictionary of Hodge and Webb, *I most certainly do not believe in regeneration!* I would gladly join with Hodge and Webb in refuting “baptismal regeneration” as Hodge defines it. If I taught what Webb assumes that I teach, I would gladly join him in condemning me. I agree with Hodge that it is absurd to even remotely suggest that every last person baptized will be saved in the end.

Will the Real Reformers Please Stand Up?

All that being said, it must be noted that I can say *everything* I want to say about baptism by simply quoting the Reformers and the Standards. I don’t go beyond anything that can be found in their writings or in the confessions they produced.

Consider again John Calvin, from his *Institutes*:

We must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life. Therefore, as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins (4.15.3).

In 4.15.4, he writes further on the comfort of baptism:

Therefore, there is no doubt that all pious folk throughout life, whenever they are troubled by a consciousness of their faults, may venture to remind themselves of their baptism, that from it they may be confirmed in assurance of that sole and perpetual cleansing which we have in Christ’s blood.

In other words, baptism is the instrument of forgiveness, and therefore of the assurance of forgiveness as well. In baptism, cleansing from sin is made available, to be received by faith. Calvin views absolution as a renewal of the baptismal covenant:

I know it is a common belief that forgiveness, which at our first regeneration we receive by baptism alone, is after baptism procured by means of penance and the keys. But those who entertain this fiction err from not considering that the power of the keys, of which they speak, so depends on baptism, that it ought not on any account to be separated from it. The sinner receives forgiveness by the ministry of the Church; in other words, not without the preaching of the gospel. And of what nature is this preaching? That we are washed from our sins by the blood of Christ. And what is the sign and evidence of that washing if it be not baptism? We see, then, that that forgiveness has reference to baptism. This error had its origin in the fictitious sacrament of penance, on which I have already touched (4.15.4).

Penance is not necessary because our one baptism covers us for our entire lives.

Calvin affirms that regeneration – new life in Christ – commences in baptism:

Here we say nothing more than the apostle Paul expounds most clearly in the sixth and seventh chapters of the Epistle to the Romans. He had discoursed of free justification, but as some wicked men thence inferred that they were to live as they listed, because their acceptance with God was not procured by the merit of works, he adds, that all who are clothed with the righteousness of Christ are at the same time regenerated by the Spirit, and that we have an earnest of this regeneration in baptism. Hence he exhorts believers not to allow sin to reign in their members (4.15.12).

Calvin views baptism as playing a critical role in assuring believers. Calvin viewed the sacraments as props, or supports for faith.

The last advantage which our faith receives from baptism is its assuring us not only that we are ingrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united to Christ himself as to be partakers of all his blessings. For he consecrated and sanctified baptism in his own body, that he might have it in common with us as the firmest bond of union and fellowship which he deigned to form with us; and hence Paul proves us to be the sons of God, from the fact that we put on Christ in baptism [Gal. 3:27]. Thus we see the fulfilment of our baptism in Christ, whom for this reason we call the proper object of baptism. Hence it is not strange that the apostles are said to have baptized in the name of Christ, though they were enjoined to baptize in the name of the Father and Spirit also [Acts 8:16; 19:5; Mt. 28:19]. For all the divine gifts held forth in baptism are found in Christ alone. And yet he who baptizes into Christ cannot but at the same time invoke the name of the Father and the Spirit. For we are cleansed by his blood, just because our gracious Father, of his incomparable mercy, willing to receive us into favor, appointed him Mediator to effect our reconciliation with himself. Regeneration we obtain from his death and resurrection only, when sanctified by his Spirit we are imbued with a new and spiritual nature. Wherefore we obtain, and in a manner distinctly perceive, in the Father the cause, in the Son the matter, and in the Spirit the effect of our purification and regeneration. Thus first John baptized, and thus afterwards the apostles by the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, understanding by the term repentance, regeneration, and by the remission of sins, ablution (4.15.6).

Calvin makes the same points in his commentary on Eph. 5. Here he notes that baptism works as an instrument in Christ's hands:

But there is no absurdity in saying that God uses the sign as an instrument . . . Some are offended at this, thinking that it takes from the Holy Spirit what is peculiar to Him. But they are mistaken ... Nothing is attributed to the sign than to be an inferior instrument, useless in itself, except so far as it derives its power from elsewhere.

Baptism's power comes from elsewhere, namely from Christ. But it does in fact have power! It is a true and efficacious instrument through which the Spirit acts. It takes nothing away from the glory of the Spirit to say that he uses means; it's not as though credit for salvation is divided between the Spirit and the sacrament. All that is at stake here is *the manner* in which the Spirit applies salvation. Does he do so with or without means? And if by means, what are those means? Preaching of the word is a means, but are the sacraments also means? Calvin clearly answered "Yes." By the power of the Spirit, baptism is an effectual means of redemption for believers. Calvin is careful to keep baptism subordinated to the Spirit's work and to faith, to be sure, but it is still regarded as an instrument in granting forgiveness and cleansing.

Preaching on Gal. 3, he says,

Again Saint Paul means not that baptism, that is to say the water hath the power to change us in such wise, that we should be clothed with our Lord Jesus Christ: for by that means God should be robbed of the praise that is due to himself alone. But he shows here the means whereby we may be certified that we are members of our Lord Jesus Christ's body ... Therefore let us learn, that it is only God that knits us to our Lord Jesus Christ, of his own mere goodness, and that he doth it by the secret power of his Holy Spirit, and yet notwithstanding ceases not to work by baptism as by an inferior instrument ...

Once more, baptism is the *instrument* of the Holy Spirit to unite us to Christ. This is no confusion of the sign with the thing signified. But there is an affirmation that God sovereignly and graciously redeems us when we pass through the waters. The Spirit and the water are not opposed but conjoined in a sacramental union. And all this is for our assurance, that our faith might have "certification" that we do in fact belong to Christ.

We have already quoted this portion from Calvin's *Antidote* to Trent, but here is one of Calvin's more robust declarations about the efficacy of baptism in fuller context:

We assert that the whole guilt of sin is taken away in baptism, so that the remains of sin still existing are not imputed. That this may be more clear, let my readers call to mind that there is a twofold grace

in baptism, for therein both remission of sins and regeneration are offered to us. We teach that full remission is made, but that regeneration is only begun and goes on making progress during the whole of life. Accordingly, sin truly remains in us, and is not instantly in one day extinguished by baptism, but as the guilt is effaced it is null in regard to imputation. Nothing is plainer than this doctrine (1.5)

Later in the *Antidote*, he writes just as forcefully:

For in the Sacraments God alone properly acts; men bring nothing of their own, but approach to receive the grace offered to them. Thus, in Baptism, God washed us by the blood of his Son and regenerated us by his Spirit; in the Supper he feeds us with the flesh and blood of Christ. What part of the work can man claim, without blasphemy, since the whole appears to be of grace? The fact of the administration being committed to men, derogates no more from the operation of God than the hand does from the artificer, since God alone acts by them, and does the whole ... For we ought to turn our thoughts not only to the sprinkling of water, but also to the spiritual reality which begets the confidence of a good conscience by the resurrection of Christ ... Such remembrance [of baptism], I say, not only makes sins venial, but altogether obliterates them. Whenever there is any question of forgiveness of sins, we must flee to Baptism and from it seek a confirmation of forgiveness. For as God reconciles us to himself by the daily promises of the Gospel, so the belief and certainty of this reconciliation, which is daily repeated even to the end of life, he seals to us by Baptism ... (see 7.5, 7, 10).

Commenting on Tit. 3:5, he writes,

Besides, baptism - being the entrance into the Church and the symbol of our ingrafting into Christ - is here appropriately introduced by Paul, when he intends to show in what manner the grace of God appeared to us; so that the strain of the passage runs thus: "God hath saved us by his mercy, the symbol and pledge of which he gave in baptism, by admitting us into his Church, and ingrafting us into the body of his Son." Now the Apostles are wont to draw an argument from the Sacraments, to prove that which is there exhibited under a figure, because it ought to be held by believers as a settled principle, that God does not sport with us by unmeaning figures, but inwardly accomplishes by his power what he exhibits by the outward sign; and therefore, baptism is fitly and truly said to be "the washing of regeneration." The efficacy and use of the sacraments will be properly understood by him who shall connect the sign and the thing signified, in such a manner as not to make the sign unmeaning and inefficacious, and who nevertheless shall not, for the sake of adorning the sign, take away from the Holy Spirit what belongs to him.

Obviously, then, Calvin believed in an efficacious baptism. To deny this is to suggest that God makes "sport" of us, mocking us with empty symbols that do not fulfill their promises. But Calvin spells out what this efficacy means with a fair degree of precision. He properly distinguishes the outward sign itself from the thing signified, and insists on the necessity of faith for the reception of the thing signified. The objective and subjective are carefully delineated. The sacraments maintain their objective efficacy and force, even if by hardness of heart, men reject the blessing of the sacrament. To be sure, "The power of the mystery [the sacrament] remains in tact, no matter how much wicked men try to their utmost to nullify it ... [M]en bear away from this Sacrament no more than they gather with the vessel of faith." He says, "Yet, it is one thing to be offered, and another to be received ... the Sacrament is one thing, the power of the Sacrament another." Calvin clearly distinguished the objective means (the sacrament) from the subjective receptor (faith). While discussing the Lord's Supper, he uses a most appropriate illustration for baptism: "[T]here is here no reason to lose faith in the promises of God, who does not stop the rain from falling from heaven, although rocks and stones do not receive the moisture of rain." (4.17.33-34). Calvin also wrote, commenting on 1 Cor. 11:27: "the efficacy of the sacraments does not depend upon the worthiness of men ... nothing is taken away from the promises of God, or falls to the ground, through the wickedness of men." Baptism is objectively a means of salvation, but what God offers and gives in baptism must be received by faith

in order for it to take effect. In other words, baptism functions analogously to the preaching of the gospel.

While Calvin's catholicity allowed him to compromise for the sake of unity in the *Consensus Tigurinus* project, he knew the health of the church ultimately required maintaining a high view of sacramental efficacy. After Martin Bucer criticized the document for its low sacramentalism, Calvin replied:

You devoutly and prudently desire that the effect of the sacraments and what the Lord confers to us through them be explicated more clearly and more fully than many allow. Indeed it was not my fault that these items were not fuller. Let us therefore bear with a sigh that which cannot be corrected.

We should recall that Calvin also subscribed to the Augsburg Confession, a Lutheran document, with a more robust view of baptism. Calvin's view of baptism was almost imperceptibly different from Luther's.^[10] Calvin was catholic in all the best senses: he wanted to maintain the church's traditional high view of the sacraments, but also wanted to keep fellowship with evangelical believers who did not.

Bucer himself maintained a high view of baptismal efficacy. The trajectory of his career led to ever higher and higher conceptions of the sacraments.

Consider these words from his *Brief Summary of Christian Doctrine and Religion Taught at Strasbourg*, a document which functioned as something of a personal theological testament:

We confess and teach that holy baptism, when given and received according to the Lord's command, is in the case of adults and of young children truly a baptism of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, whereby those who are baptized have all their sins washed away, are buried into the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, are incorporated into him, and put on him for a new and godly life and the blessed resurrection, and through him become children and heirs of God.

Thus, even infants are capable of receiving regeneration – and in the rite of baptism, no less. Baptism is viewed not as a guarantee of final salvation, but as the inception point of new life in Christ and the church. This is virtually identical to Calvin's doctrine of baptismal regeneration. Elsewhere Bucer spoke of "salvation" being "offered" and "conferred" in baptism. But Bucer always insists that only if faith is present is the thing given in baptism identical to the thing received.

Ursinus' commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism (363ff) views covenant children as having already entered the process of regeneration before baptism. Baptism is efficacious, though it would be a stretch to say Ursinus held to baptismal regeneration as such. His comments are still worth examining:

Those are not to be excluded from baptism, to whom the benefit of the remission of sins, and of regeneration belongs. But this benefit belongs to the infants of the church; for redemption from sin, by the blood of Christ and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them no less than to the adult... Those unto whom the things signified belong, unto them the sign also belongs...

[B]ut that baptism ought to be administered to infants also; for they are holy; the promise is unto them; the kingdom of heaven is theirs; and God, who is certainly not the God of the wicked, declares that he will also be their God. Neither is there any condition in infants which would forbid the use of baptism. Who then can forbid water, or exclude them from baptism, seeing that they are partakers with the whole church of the same blessings?...

[I]nfants have the Holy Ghost, and are regenerated by him ... If infants now have the Holy Ghost, he certainly works in them regeneration, good inclinations, new desires, and such other things as are necessary for their salvation ... Again, regeneration by the Holy Ghost, and faith, or an inclination to faith and repentance are sufficient for baptism; ...

[Infants] are baptized with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, [for] the forgiveness of all their sins, the giving of the Holy Spirit, and ingrafting into the church and into his own body ...

When baptism is, therefore, said to be the laver or washing of regeneration, to save us, or to wash away sins, it is meant that the external baptism is a sign of the internal, that is, of regeneration, salvation and of spiritual absolution; and this internal baptism is said to be joined with that which is external, in the right and proper use of it...

All, and only those who are renewed or being renewed, receive baptism lawfully, being baptized for those ends for which Christ instituted this sacrament...

Since the infant children of Christians are also included in the church into which Christ will have all those who belong to him to be received and enrolled by baptism; and as baptism has been substituted in the place of circumcision, by which (as well to the infants as to the adults belonging to the seed of Abraham,) justification, regeneration and reception into the church were sealed by and for the sake of Christ ...

Infants already possess adoption and the Spirit before baptism, according to Ursinus. But baptism completes and ratifies their possession of these things. Like Calvin, he seeks to hold together the pre-baptismal status of the covenant child, with a high view of sacramental efficacy (though I would say he does so with considerably less success than Calvin).

Francis Turretin's *Institutes* are more scholastic in tone, but carry the same high view of baptism found in Calvin, Bucer, and many other early Reformers. Turretin understood that the issue of sacramental efficacy vis-à-vis Rome was complex. While the Reformers and Rome both agreed that the sacraments were efficacious, the mode and nature of that efficacy was a matter of dispute (19.8.6). For the Reformers, the sacraments acquired their efficacy not from any inner, "magical," or physical power, but from the Word and Spirit. Baptism, for Turretin, covered post-baptismal sin, an important point to note since Turretin also stressed the indwelling corruption that remains in the baptized.

Turretin explains the meaning of baptism in 19.11.9: "[T]he first sacrament of the Christian church, by which upon the covenanted, having been received into the family of God by the external sprinkling of water in the name of the Trinity, remission of sins and regeneration by the blood of Christ and the Holy Spirit are bestowed and sealed." Obviously, a word like "bestowed" should not be overlooked, though it could indicate Turretin has in view a more objective than subjective understanding of regeneration.

For Turretin, the sacraments are sure instruments of salvation in the hand of Christ. The sacraments function analogous to the preached Word: "God does not trifle by instituting bare and empty signs; but as by the vocal word he really performs what he promises, so in the sacrament (which is a palpable and visible word) he gives by the thing itself that which the signs represent" (19.1.12). In other words, the outward sign is the means through which the thing signified is conferred.

Further, according to Turretin, believers receive life-long benefit from baptism. The blessings of baptism persist "through the whole course of life even up to death" (19.20.25), for "by baptism is sealed to us the remission not only of past and present, but also future sins" (19.20.12). Baptism is the basis for post-baptismal absolution, just as in Calvin. The efficacy of baptism is not limited to the time of its administration.

Baptism is an efficacious means of grace in Turretin's system. Baptism is therefore ordinarily necessary to salvation:

Our opinion, however, is that baptism is indeed necessary according to the divine institution as an external means of salvation (by which God is efficacious in its legitimate use), so that he who despises it is guilty of a heinous crime and incurs eternal punishment. But we believe it is not so absolutely necessary that he who is deprived of it by no fault of his own is to be forthwith excluded from the kingdom of heaven and that salvation cannot be obtained without it.

Even Charles Hodge could speak in high terms of baptism's efficacy. Commenting on Eph. 5, he drew an analogy between the efficacy of preaching and baptism:

God is pleased to connect the benefits of redemption with the believing reception of the truth. And he is pleased to connect these same benefits with the believing reception of baptism. That is, as the Spirit works with and by the truth, so he works with and by baptism, in communicating the blessings of the covenant of grace. Therefore, as we are said to be saved by the word, with equal propriety we are said to be saved by baptism ...

Baptism, like the Word, is a means of salvation. The believing reception of baptism results in redemption, just like the believing reception of gospel preaching.

While many Reformed theologians have moved away from these sacramental views (often engaging in historical revisionism to keep their Reformed pedigree pure), others have maintained the tradition. For example, Herman Ridderbos' now classic *Paul* (ch. 10) states, "Baptism ... [is] the means by which the church participates in the redemptive event that took place once for all in Christ and receives a share in the gift of the Spirit."

Baptism is viewed as both "the symbol and the means of salvation ... both in the ethical and in the forensic sense." In Tit. 3:5, baptism is "understood in the context of the saving eschatological activity of God ('the appearing' of his mercy, etc.) ... which represents the total renewal of the life of man ..."

Baptism is both instrumental and transitional: "Baptism functions as the instrument [of cleansing] . . . [T]he baptized passes over to the ownership of him in whose name the baptismal act takes place." Ridderbos claims baptism is the sacrament of union with Christ:

[B]aptism binds one to Christ and the order of life represented by him. It is this union with Christ by baptism that Paul intends when in Gal. 3:27 he describes baptism as 'putting on Christ'. . . [B]aptism makes one participate in Christ as him who, as the one seed of Abraham and as the 'second man,' represents and contains within himself those belonging to him. In that same sense one can speak of being 'baptized into his body.'

Ridderbos asks the question: "[W]hat happens in or by baptism?" And he answers:

[B]y baptism, the believer becomes a sharer in what has taken place with Christ ... Because believers have been baptized they know, or at least they must and may know, that they have once died, been buried, and raised with Christ (Rom. 6:3; Col. 2:12). In that sense the later characterization of baptism as the seal of belonging to Christ – a qualification Paul uses for circumcision (Rom. 4:11) – is certainly not out of place.

On the other hand, the meaning of baptism is certainly not to be expressed exclusively in noetic categories. Baptism is also the means by which communion with the death and burial of Christ comes into being (Rom. 6:4), the place where union is effected (Col. 2:12), the means by which Christ cleanses his church (Eph. 5:26), and God has saved it (Tit. 3:5). All these formulations speak clearly of the significance of baptism in mediating redemption; they speak of what happens in and by baptism, and not merely of what happened before baptism and of which baptism would only be the confirmation ... Baptism is the means in God's hand, the place where he speaks and acts.

Of course, Ridderbos, like Calvin, insisted that what is offered and presented in baptism (namely Christ and the new creation) must be received by faith: "There can consequently be no suggestion that in Paul baptism can in any

way whatever be detached from faith ... faith is the implicit presupposition in baptism.” This excludes any suggestion that baptism imparts salvation *ex opere operato*, as Ridderbos points out. And yet, we must guard against thinking that it is our faith that makes baptism effective:

It is God who gives baptism its power ... Neither does this make the operation of baptism dependent on the condition of the recipient in the sense that only faith can make baptism effectual, but it says that baptism remains dependent on divine action, that God . . . maintains the correlation between faith and baptism ... God is the person who acts in baptism ... [W]hile faith according to its nature is an act of man, baptism according to its nature is an activity of God and on the part of God. That which the believer appropriates to himself on the proclamation of the gospel God promises and bestows upon him in baptism.

The connection Ridderbos detects between baptism and new creation may be regarded as a form of baptismal regeneration, albeit in the objective sense:

Baptism, however, according to its essence is once for all, because it marks the transition from the mode of existence of the old man to that of the new. Baptism is a rite of incorporation, and as such expresses the corporate communal character of the salvation given in Christ. For this reason, faith is not without baptism, just as baptism is not without faith ... It is the washing of regeneration for everyone who with his mouth confesses Jesus as Lord, and in his heart believes that God has raised him from the dead (Rom. 10:9; Tit. 3:5) ... For it is in baptism that the believer has put on Christ (Gal. 3:27), and thus participates in the nullification in Christ of the old mode of existence and in the new creation of God revealed in him.

Ridderbos’ biblical-theological approach gives rise to a high conception of baptism’s eschatological efficacy. It is the sacrament of the new aeon, of initiation into the new creation.

Turning from the private writings of Reformed theologians[11] to public confessions, we find the same truths emphasized and the same structure of sacramental theology. Again, let us canvas the history of Reformational thought.

The Second Helvetic Confession (written by Heinrich Bullinger in 1561) gives one of the fullest explications of sacramental theology in all of the Reformed tradition. The document states early on, “By baptism we are ingrafted into the body of Christ.” In other words, baptism is the objective means through which a change in our relationship to Christ is effected. Later, it expounds this by focusing on Christ’s work in the sacraments. Baptism is not a human act; God himself is the Baptizer. God himself guarantees the integrity and efficacy of the sacrament for his faithful people, even apart from the character of the minister:

CHRIST STILL WORKS IN SACRAMENTS. And as God is the author of the sacraments, so he continually works in the Church in which they are rightly carried out; so that the faithful, when they receive them from the ministers, know that God works in his own ordinance, and therefore they receive them as from the hand of God; and the minister's faults (even if they be very great) cannot affect them, since they acknowledge the integrity of the sacraments to depend upon the institution of the Lord.

Sacraments are not bare signs; they are signs joined to the thing signified:

IN WHAT THE SACRAMENTS CONSIST. And as formerly the sacraments consisted of the word, the sign, and the thing signified; so even now they are composed, as it were, of the same parts. For the Word of God makes them sacraments, which before they were not.

Thus, in baptism, the outward washing with water and the Word of God are joined to regeneration and forgiveness:

For in baptism the sign is the element of water, and that visible washing which is done by the minister; but the thing signified is regeneration and the cleansing from sins ... For Christ’s first institution and consecration of the sacraments remains always effectual in the Church of God

The outward signs are so joined to the inner realities that their names are interchangeable. The outward sign is not the cause, but the instrument, of the sacrament's efficacy. But this also means the outward sign is not dispensable since it is the vehicle through which the thing signified is offered and bestowed. Ordinarily we should not imagine ourselves as possessing the thing signified apart from participation in the sign itself:

THE SACRAMENTAL UNION. Therefore the signs acquire the names of things because they are mystical signs of sacred things, and because the signs and the things signified are sacramentally joined together; joined together, I say, or united by a mystical signification, and by the purpose or will of him who instituted the sacraments.

Neither do we approve of the doctrine of those who speak of the sacraments just as common signs, not sanctified and effectual. Nor do we approve of those who despise the visible aspect of the sacraments because of the invisible, and so believe the signs to be superfluous because they think they already enjoy the things themselves, as the Messalians are said to have held.

The efficacy of the sacrament does not make it an automatic passport to heaven. What is offered in the sacrament must be received in faith in order for the recipient to be blessed. Once again, the objective and subjective are joined together. It has always been a staple of the Reformed tradition that salvific blessings are communicated through outward means and are received by faith, and Second Helvetic maintains that heritage. In other words, while God has joined together the sign and the thing signified, our unbelief can pry apart the sacramental union, the sign and the thing signified. The character of the recipient determines the subjective meaning of baptism.

THE THING SIGNIFIED IS NEITHER INCLUDED IN OR BOUND TO THE SACRAMENTS.

We do not approve of the doctrine of those who teach that grace and the things signified are so bound to and included in the signs that whoever participate outwardly in the signs, no matter what sort of persons they be, also inwardly participate in the grace and things signified.

The efficacy of the sacrament is objective, yet conditional (with faith being the subjective condition). Thus, if the efficacy of the sacrament is abrogated, so that it loses its salvific power, the fault lies in the hard heart of the recipient, not in God's failure to keep his Word:

However, as we do not estimate the value of the sacraments by the worthiness or unworthiness of the ministers, so we do not estimate it by the condition of those who receive them. For we know that the value of the sacraments depends upon faith and upon the truthfulness and pure goodness of God. For as the Word of God remains the true Word of God, in which, when it is preached, not only bare words are repeated, but at the same time the things signified or announced in words are offered by God, even if the ungodly and unbelievers hear and understand the words yet do not enjoy the things signified, because they do not receive them by true faith; so the sacraments, which by the Word consist of signs and the things signified, remain true and inviolate sacraments, signifying not only sacred things, but, by God offering, the things signified, even if unbelievers do not receive the things offered. This is not the fault of God who gives and offers them, but the fault of men who receive them without faith and illegitimately; but whose unbelief does not invalidate the faithfulness of God (Rom. 3:3 f.).

The efficacy of baptism is not limited to the moment of administration, as if additional sacraments (e.g., re-baptism or penance) or good works would be needed to maintain the blessings conferred in baptism. Rather, one baptism suffices for all of life. Its efficacy extends to cover the whole of course of our existence: "For baptism once received continues for all of life, and is a perpetual sealing of our adoption."

Then Confession turns to the meaning of baptism itself. The language is forceful, direct, and unmistakable. Indeed, it gives one of the most eloquent

Reformed statements of the blessings of baptism:

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE BAPTIZED. Now to be baptized in the name of Christ is to be enrolled, entered, and received into the covenant and family, and so into the inheritance of the sons of God; yes, and in this life to be called after the name of God; that is to say, to be called a son of God; to be cleansed also from the filthiness of sins, and to be granted the manifold grace of God, in order to lead a new and innocent life. Baptism, therefore, calls to mind and renews the great favor God has shown to the race of mortal men. For we are all born in the pollution of sin and are the children of wrath. But God, who is rich in mercy, freely cleanses us from our sins by the blood of his Son, and in him adopts us to be his sons, and by a holy covenant joins us to himself, and enriches us with various gifts, that we might live a new life. All these things are assured by baptism. For inwardly we are regenerated, purified, and renewed by God through the Holy Spirit and outwardly we receive the assurance of the greatest gifts in the water, by which also those great benefits are represented, and, as it were, set before our eyes to be beheld.

Baptism has an assuring role. The outward sign is the surety that God has accomplished these things for us:

WE ARE BAPTIZED WITH WATER. And therefore we are baptized, that is, washed or sprinkled with visible water. For the water washes dirt away, and cools and refreshes hot and tired bodies. And the grace of God performs these things for souls, and does so invisibly or spiritually.

Nevertheless, baptismal efficacy does not produce formalism or ritualism, properly understood. Indeed, while baptism itself is a sign and seal of gospel blessings, it obligates us to live as members of God's holy family and army.

Our objective status imposes upon us certain responsibilities and duties:

THE OBLIGATION OF BAPTISM. Moreover, God also separates us from all strange religions and peoples by the symbol of baptism, and consecrates us to himself as his property. We, therefore, confess our faith when we are baptized, and obligate ourselves to God for obedience, mortification of the flesh, and newness of life. Hence, we are enlisted in the holy military service of Christ that all our life long we should fight against the world, Satan, and our own flesh. Moreover, we are baptized into one body of the Church, that with all members of the Church we might beautifully concur in the one religion and in mutual services.

Finally, we are reminded that baptism is of God and only his blessing makes it effectual unto salvation:

For we believe that one baptism of the Church has been sanctified in God's first institution, and that it is consecrated by the Word and is also effectual today in virtue of God's first blessing.

The same truths are found in the 1560 Scots Confession of John Knox (and five colleagues), albeit, much more compactly:

These sacraments, both of the Old Testament and of the New, were instituted by God not only to make a visible distinction between his people and those who were without the Covenant, but also to exercise the faith of his children and, by participation of these sacraments, to seal in their hearts the assurance of his promise, and of that most blessed conjunction, union, and society, which the chosen have with their Head, Christ Jesus. And so we utterly condemn the vanity of those who affirm the sacraments to be nothing else than naked and bare signs. No, we assuredly believe that by Baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his righteousness, by which our sins are covered and remitted ...

Note that this Confession focuses on the pastoral significance of the sacraments. The sacraments not only mark us out as God's people (note the objectivity!), they assure us of his favor towards us. And yet this does not produce careless presumption, for once again, faith is called for (note the subjectivity!). Indeed, the sacraments can only perform their proper function if we "exercise" faith in them (that is to say, in their application and administration). Thus, by participating in the sacraments, believers have the promises of the gospel sealed unto their hearts. This is not trusting in a ritual to save; it is trusting Christ to be present where he has promised to be.

In the strongest possible terms, this Confession denies that the sacraments can be regarded as empty signs of something that happens apart from the sacramental

action. Rather, baptism is the agent through which we are engrafted into Christ, and therefore, the objective instrument of justification and regeneration.

We should also mention Calvin's catechetical documents here. Calvin wrote several catechisms, all of which upheld the same high doctrine of baptism seen in his other writings. We will not give all the evidence here; a couple examples will have to suffice. His 1538 document "Instruction for Children in Christian Doctrine" begins with this sequence:

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.

Later it connects baptism, ecclesiology, and salvation:

Teacher: What is the third part of this Christian confession?

Child: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the remission of sins, the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Teacher: What do you confess in saying this?

Child: That the Holy Spirit is he by whom we are regenerated and are placed into the church wherein we acquire pardon of sins and improvement of life and after this life are consoled by the expectation of eternal life.

Teacher: Of what use to you is this faith and profession?

Child: So that I continually request from God the receiving of his Holy Spirit, that I go gladly into the Christian assembly in which I must seek and receive consolation and correction of life, so that therein, with greater certainty, I might await the resurrection and everlasting life.

Teacher: How did you come into this communion of the church?

Child: Through baptism.

Teacher: What is this baptism?

Child: It is the washing of regeneration and cleansing from sin.

Teacher: With what words is baptism administered?

Child: These: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Teacher: What is the meaning of these words?

Child: It is this: I wash you so that you would be made sons of God by the command and will of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Teacher: What fruit do you receive from this?

Child: Very great fruit, because it is no small thing if I obtain remission of my sins, if I acquire from Christ my savior a new and everlasting life, if I abstain from every vice, and also if I give myself more and more unto a new and heavenly life. [Thanks to Joel Garver for the translation; the entire document is available at <http://www.lasalle.edu/~garver/calcat.html>.]

In the introduction to Calvin's Geneva Catechism, he shows that the Romanists have actually devalued baptism by putting so much emphasis on confirmation:

That spurious Confirmation, which they have substituted in its stead, they deck out like a harlot, with great splendour of ceremonies, and gorgeous shows without number; nay, in their wish to adorn it, they speak of it in terms of execrable blasphemy, when they give out that it is a sacrament of greater dignity than baptism, and call those only half Christians who have not been besmeared with their oil. Meanwhile, the whole proceeding consists of nothing but theatrical gesticulations, or rather the wanton sporting of apes, without any skill in imitation.

The section on the sacraments and baptism runs thus, with my annotations in brackets:

Master. - Is there no other medium, as it is called, than the Word by which God may communicate himself to us?

Scholar. - To the preaching of the Word he has added the Sacraments. [Note the sacraments play a role analogous to the Word. Both are means by which God communicates himself and his gifts to us.]

Master. - What is a Sacrament?

Scholar. - An outward attestation of the divine benevolence towards us, which, by a visible sign, figures spiritual grace, to seal the promises of God on our hearts, and thereby better confirm their truth to us. [Here Calvin focuses on the assuring role of the sacraments, but more will be said about the efficacy further on.]

Master. - Is there such virtue in a visible sign that it can establish our consciences in a full assurance of salvation?

Scholar. - This virtue it has not of itself, but by the will of God, because it was instituted for this end. [God authorizes the sacraments; they have no virtue or power naturally or magically. Their efficacy derives from God's institution.]

Master. - Seeing it is the proper office of the Holy Spirit to seal the promises of God on our minds, how do you attribute this to the sacraments?

Scholar. - There is a wide difference between him and them. To move and affect the heart, to enlighten the mind, to render the conscience sure and tranquil, truly belongs to the Spirit alone; so that it ought to be regarded as wholly his work, and be ascribed to him alone, that no other may have the praise; but this does not at all prevent God from employing the sacraments as secondary instruments, and applying them to what use he deems proper, without derogating in any respect from the agency of the Spirit. [The sacraments do not act on their own. God acts through the sacraments as instruments in his hand. God gets all the credit and glory for what he accomplishes through these means.]

Master. - You think, then, that the power and efficacy of a sacrament is not contained in the outward element, but flows entirely from the Spirit of God?

Scholar. - I think so; viz., that the Lord hath been pleased to exert his energy by his instruments, this being the purpose to which he destined them: this he does without detracting in any respect from the virtue of his Spirit. [Calvin made a clear distinction between sign and thing signified. There is more content here in the question than the answer: the sacraments have power and efficacy, but it flows from the Spirit.]

Master. - Can you give me a reason why he so acts?

Scholar. - In this way he consults our weakness. If we were wholly spiritual, we might, like the angels, spiritually behold both him and his grace; but as we are surrounded with this body of clay, we need figures or mirrors to exhibit a view of spiritual and heavenly things in a kind of earthly manner; for we could not otherwise attain to them. At the same time, it is our interest to have all our senses exercised in the promises of God, that they may be the better confirmed to us. [Calvin tied God's use of outward means to our physicality and fallenness/weakness. In other words, these means are wisely suited to our nature. God makes his promise appeal to the whole person.]

Master. - If it is true that the sacraments were instituted by God to be helps to our necessity, is it not arrogance for any one to hold that he can dispense with them as unnecessary?

Scholar. - It certainly is; and hence, if any one of his own accord abstains from the use of them, as if he had no need of them, he contemns Christ, spurns his grace, and quenches the Spirit. [The sacraments are necessary; it is arrogant and dangerous to reject them. Indeed, to have contempt for the sacraments is to have contempt for Christ and the Spirit since they are present and offered in these means.]

Master. - But what confidence can there be in the sacraments as a means of establishing the conscience, and what certain security can be conceived from things which the good and bad use indiscriminately?

Scholar. - Although the wicked, so to speak, annihilate the gifts of God offered in the sacraments in so far as regards themselves, they do not thereby deprive the sacraments of their nature and virtue. [The question deals with how the sacraments function differently for the faithful. The wicked and unbelieving may vitiate God's gift and offer in the sacraments, but the means themselves retain their power and integrity.]

Master. - How, then, and when does the effect follow the use of the sacraments?

Scholar. - When we receive them in faith, seeking Christ alone and his grace in them. [By faith we receive what God offers. We seek Christ and his grace in these means.]

Master. - Why do you say that Christ is to be sought in them?

Scholar. - I mean that we are not to cleave to the visible signs so as to seek salvation from them, or imagine that the power of conferring grace is either fixed or included in them, but rather that the sign is to be used as a help, by which, when seeking salvation and complete felicity, we are pointed directly to Christ. [Again, the sacraments are not an end in themselves. They are a means to the end of Christ.]

Master. - Seeing that faith is requisite for the use of them, how do you say that they are given us to confirm our faith, to make us more certain of the promises of God?

Scholar. - It is by no means sufficient that faith is once begun in us. It must be nourished continually, and increase more and more every day. To nourish, strengthen, and advance it, the Lord instituted the sacraments. This indeed Paul intimates, when he says that they have the effect of sealing the promises of God. (Rom. iv. 11.) [Faith receives what God offers in the sacraments. The sacraments are objective instruments of salvation; faith is sole subjective instrument and receptor of salvation.]

Master. - But is it not an indication of unbelief not to have entire faith in the promises of God until they are confirmed to us from another source?

Scholar. - It certainly argues a weakness of faith under which the children of God labour. They do not, however, cease to be believers, though the faith with which they are endued is still small and imperfect; for as long as we continue in this world remains of distrust cleave to our flesh, and these there is no other way of shaking off than by making continual progress even unto the end. It is therefore always necessary to be going forward.

Master. - How many are the sacraments of the Christian Church?

Scholar. - There are only two, whose use is common among all believers.

Master. - What are they?

Scholar. - Baptism and the Holy Supper.

Master. - What likeness or difference is there between them?

Scholar. - Baptism is a kind of entrance into the Church; for we have in it a testimony that we who are otherwise strangers and aliens, are received into the family of God, so as to be counted of his household; on the other hand, the Supper attests that God exhibits himself to us by nourishing our souls. [Baptism is adoption into God's family.]

Master. - That the meaning of both may be more clear to us, let us treat of them separately. First, what is the meaning of Baptism?

Scholar. - It consists of two parts. For, first, Forgiveness of sins; and, secondly, Spiritual regeneration, is figured by it. (Eph. v. 26 ; Rom. vi. 4.) [Calvin consistently viewed baptism as an objective instrument of pardon and regeneration.]

Master. - What resemblance has water with these things, so as to represent them?

Scholar. - Forgiveness of sins is a kind of washing, by which our souls are cleansed from their defilements, just as bodily stains are washed away by water.

Master. - What do you say of Regeneration?

Scholar. - Since the mortification of our nature is its beginning, and our becoming new creatures its end, a figure of death is set before us when the water is poured upon the head, and the figure of a new life when instead of remaining immersed under water, we only enter it for a moment as a kind of grave, out of which we instantly emerge. [Calvin was not at his best in commenting on the mode of baptism.]

Master. - Do you think that the water is a washing of the soul?

Scholar. - By no means; for it were impious to snatch away this honour from the blood of Christ, which was shed in order to wipe away all our stains, and render us pure and unpolluted in the sight of God. (1 Pet. i. 19; 1 John I. 7.) And we receive the fruit of this cleansing when the Holy Spirit sprinkles our consciences with that sacred blood. Of this we have a seal in the Sacrament. [Here Calvin distinguishes the sign from the thing signified. In other words, he explains the "mechanics" of how baptism works. The power is not in the water; it's in the Holy Spirit who accompanies the water.]

Master. - But do you attribute nothing more to the water than that it is a figure of ablution?

Scholar. - I understand it to be a figure, but still so that the reality is annexed to it; for God does not disappoint us when he promises us his gifts. Accordingly, it is certain that both pardon of sins and newness of life are offered to us in baptism, and received by us. [This is the key sentence. Note the objective and subjective: the language of giving and receiving is used. Baptism is not an empty

symbol, but is conjoined to the reality it figures. This is Calvin's "sacramental union" of the sign and thing signified.]

Master. - Is this grace bestowed on all indiscriminately?

Scholar. - Many precluding its entrance by their depravity, make it void to themselves. Hence the benefit extends to believers only, and yet the Sacrament loses nothing of its nature. [Note the necessity of faith to receive what God gives. And yet, the sacrament itself retains its nature as an efficacious instrument of grace even apart from our response. Again, the objective and subjective are distinguished.]

Master. - Whence is Regeneration derived?

Scholar. - From the Death and Resurrection of Christ taken together. His death hath this efficacy, that by means of it our old man is crucified, and the vitiosity of our nature in a manner buried, so as no more to be in vigour in us. Our reformation to a new life, so as to obey the righteousness of God, is the result of the resurrection.

Master. - How are these blessings bestowed upon us by Baptism?

Scholar. - If we do not render the promises there offered unfruitful by rejecting them, we are clothed with Christ, and presented with his Spirit. [Note the "if": baptism's saving efficacy is conditional. Faith receives both Christ and the Spirit in baptism.]

Master. - What must we do in order to use Baptism duly?

Scholar. - The right use of Baptism consists in faith and repentance; that is, we must first hold with a firm heartfelt reliance that, being purified from all stains by the blood of Christ, we are pleasing to God: secondly, we must feel his Spirit dwelling in us, and declare this to others by our actions, and we must constantly exercise ourselves in aiming at the mortification of our flesh, and obedience to the righteousness of God. [Calvin's focus here is on the subjective response of the one baptized. Faith must be accompanied with repentance.]

Master. - If these things are requisite to the legitimate use of Baptism, how comes it that we baptize Infants?

Scholar. - It is not necessary that faith and repentance should always precede baptism. They are only required from those whose age makes them capable of both. It will be sufficient, then, if, after infants have grown up, they exhibit the power of their baptism. [In other contexts, Calvin made considerably more robust statements about the possibility of infant faith.]

Master. - Can you demonstrate by reason that there is nothing absurd in this?

Scholar. - Yes; if it be conceded to me that our Lord instituted nothing at variance with reason. For while Moses and all the Prophets teach that circumcision was a sign of repentance, and was even as Paul declares the sacrament of faith, we see that infants were not excluded from it. (Deut. xxx. 6; Jer. iv. 4; Rom. iv. 11.)

Master. - But are they now admitted to Baptism for the same reason that was valid in circumcision?

Scholar. - The very same, seeing that the promises which God anciently gave to the people of Israel are now published through the whole world.

Master. - But do you infer from thence that the sign also is to be used?

Scholar. - He who will duly ponder all things in both ordinances, will perceive this to follow. Christ in making us partakers of his grace, which had been formerly bestowed on Israel, did not condition, that it should either be more obscure or in some respect less abundant. Nay, rather he shed it upon us both more clearly and more abundantly ...

Master. - Is no other end besides proposed by these two Sacraments?

Scholar. - They are also marks and as it were badges of our profession. For by the use of them we profess our faith before men, and testify our consent in the religion of Christ. [For Calvin, the sacraments are professions of faith, but this is secondary to their function as testimonies of God's covenant promises.]

Master. - Were any one to despise the use of them, in what light should it be regarded?

Scholar. - As an indirect denial of Christ. Assuredly such a person, inasmuch as he deigns not to confess himself a Christian, deserves not to be classed among Christians. [In other words, baptism is ordinarily necessary for salvation. To reject baptism is to reject Christ.]

Master. - Is it enough to receive both once in a lifetime?

Scholar. - It is enough so to receive baptism, which may not be repeated. It is different with the Supper.

Master. - What is the difference?

Scholar. - By baptism the Lord adopts us and brings us into his Church, so as thereafter to regard us as part of his house-hold. After he has admitted us among the number of his people, he testifies by the Supper that he takes a continual interest in nourishing us. [Again, note that baptism is an adoption rite. New life received in baptism is fed and nurtured at the table.]

The French Confession, drawn up by Calvin in 1559, teaches the same high view of baptism found in Calvin's other writings already examined. The Confession states that baptism is necessary in light of original sin. After baptism, sin remains, but the condemnation of sin has been abolished for believers:

We believe, also, that this evil is truly sin, sufficient for the condemnation of the whole human race, even of little children in the mother's womb, and that God considers it as such; even after baptism it is still of the nature of sin, but the condemnation of it is abolished for the children of God, out of his mere free grace and love.

While parents are warned to not present their children for Romish baptism, baptisms performed in Roman communions are still efficacious. This is because God, not the officiating minister, is the one who actually performs the baptismal act. Those baptized by Rome need not seek a second "Reformed" baptism:

XXVIII. In this belief we declare that, properly speaking, there can be no Church where the Word of God is not received, nor profession made of subjection to it, nor use of the sacraments. Therefore we condemn the papal assemblies, as the pure Word of God is banished from them, their sacraments are corrupted, or falsified, or destroyed, and all superstitions and idolatries are in them. We hold, then, that all who take part in those acts, and commune in that Church, separate and cut themselves off from the body of Christ. Nevertheless, as some trace of the Church is left in the papacy, and the virtue and substance of baptism remain, and as the efficacy of baptism does not depend upon the person who administers it, we confess that those baptized in it do not need a second baptism. But, on account of its corruptions, we can not present children to be baptized in it without incurring pollution.

Given that Calvin was no stranger to Rome's corruption, this is manifest proof that Calvin viewed baptism as possessing an objective force.

When the Confession finally takes up the efficacy of baptism itself, it clearly indicates that baptism is the instrumental means of union of Christ. By way of baptism, we come to share in the blessings of the body of Christ, namely forgiveness and new life in the Spirit:

XXXV. We confess only two sacraments common to the whole Church, of which the first, baptism, is given as a pledge of our adoption; for by it we are grafted into the body of Christ, so as to be washed and cleansed by his blood, and then renewed in purity of life by his Holy Spirit. We hold, also, that although we are baptized only once, yet the gain that it symbolizes to us reaches over our whole lives and to our death, so that we have a lasting witness that Jesus Christ will always be our justification and sanctification. Nevertheless, although it is a sacrament of faith and penitence, yet as God receives little children into the Church with their fathers, we say, upon the authority of Jesus Christ, that the children of believing parents should be baptized.

Note that baptism's efficacy is not limited to the moment of administration, but covers the whole of our lives, a constant refrain in early Reformed theology.

Further, baptism, has a pastoral role. Those who receive the sacrament in faith may be assured that they have received the thing signified. Christ's promise and the presence of the Spirit make the sacraments effectual. Baptism provides an objective prop, or support, on which faith can rest.

XXXVII. We believe, as has been said, that in the Lord's Supper, as well in baptism, God gives us really and in fact that which he there sets forth to us; and that consequently with these signs is given the true possession and enjoyment of that which they present to us. And thus all who bring a pure faith, like a vessel, to the sacred table of Christ, receive truly that of which it is a sign; for the body and the blood of Jesus Christ give food and drink to the soul, no less than bread and wine nourish the body.

XXXVIII. Thus we hold water, being a feeble element, still testifies to us in truth the inward cleansing of our souls in the blood of Jesus Christ by the efficacy of his Spirit, and that the bread and wine given to us in the sacrament serve to our spiritual nourishment, inasmuch as they show, as to our sight, that the body of Christ is our meat, and his blood our drink. And we reject the Enthusiasts and Sacramentarians who will not receive such signs and marks, although our Savior said: 'This is my body, and this cup is my blood.'

These same truths resonate through the Belgic Confession, written slightly later. Article 33 says God "ordained sacraments for us to seal his promises in us, to pledge his good will and grace toward us, and also to nourish and sustain our faith." The sacraments have an assuring function, for through them God confirms "in us the salvation he imparts to us." But, that's not all. Additionally, the sacraments are instruments of salvation, "by means of which God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. So they are not empty and hollow signs to fool and deceive us, for their truth is Jesus Christ, without whom they would be nothing." Again, the view that the sacraments may be regarded as empty symbols, devoid of the saving power, presence, and promise of Christ, is flatly rejected. The implication is that God does not deceive us in the administration of his ordinances; he gives what he promises, namely Christ and his benefits. The sacraments are objective agents of applying redemption to us.

Specifically referring to baptism, the Belgic Confession affirms that baptism's efficacy derives solely from the blood of Christ. Baptism

signifies to us that just as water washes away the dirt of the body when it is poured on us and also is seen on the body of the baptized when it is sprinkled on him, so too the blood of Christ does the same thing internally, in the soul, by the Holy Spirit. It washes and cleanses it from its sins and transforms us from being the children of wrath into the children of God. This does not happen by the physical water but by the sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God, who is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, who is the devil, and to enter the spiritual land of Canaan.

There is a parallel between the outward washing and the inward blessing, seen in the "just as" language. The objective and subjective are distinguished but not separated. The physical water itself is not the source of baptism's cleansing efficacy, of course. Neither is the human officiant:

So ministers, as far as their work is concerned, give us the sacrament and what is visible, but our Lord gives what the sacrament signifies-- namely the invisible gifts and graces; washing, purifying, and cleansing our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving us true assurance of his fatherly goodness; clothing us with the "new man" and stripping off the "old," with all its works.

The Lord gives what he signifies when baptism is received in faith. Baptism is the means through which believers receive a new status and begin a new life.

The Belgic Confession also takes up the question of baptism's necessity. Baptism is ordinarily necessary for salvation, but is not to be repeated because its ongoing power resides in Christ, not our works: "[A]nyone who aspires to reach eternal life ought to be baptized only once without ever repeating it-- for we cannot be born twice. Yet this baptism is profitable not only when the water is on us and when we receive it but throughout our entire lives." Because baptism bestows Christ, and Christ promises to be with his people and continually intercede for them on the basis of his shed blood, baptism's efficacy never dries up. To practice rebaptism is to doubt the very Word of God.

Even infants of believers should be brought for baptism, according to the Belgic document. And their parents should be assured that the baptism of their child

means that Christ's blood was shed for them: "And truly, Christ has shed his blood no less for washing the little children of believers than he did for adults." Infants can receive all that baptism signifies, just as adults. There is not one baptism for adults, and another for infants. Rather, both are baptized into the same Christ and receive the same blessings. Again, the objectivity of the sacrament's power is made clear.

Baptism also obligates us to live as the faithful people of God. The objective entails and demands a subjective response: "By it [baptism] we are received into God's church and set apart from all other people and alien religions, that we may be dedicated entirely to him, bearing his mark and sign. It also witnesses to us that he will be our God forever, since he is our gracious Father."

Our final example comes from the Westminster Standards. The teaching of the Standards on sacramental efficacy is quite clear, but also scattered through the documents. By the time of the Westminster Assembly, Reformed theology had become quite diverse. Part of the Assembly's project was creating a consensus that could bind together a religiously divided nation. The Westminster Standards are compromise documents in the sense that several different parties had to be appeased. Thus, the fruit of the assembly has some internal tensions; nevertheless, the finished product exhibits a remarkable degree of self-consistency and self-harmony, despite harboring a variety of viewpoints within a single text. The Westminsterian framework is very similar to what we've already seen.

The Westminster divines confessed that the sacraments are "effectual means of salvation" (WSC 91). This is so, not because of any inherent virtue in the minister or the external element. Rather, Christ and the Spirit make the sacraments salvific to those who receive them in faith. In the sacrament of baptism, the thing signified (union with Christ in all his gracious and glorious blessing) is sealed (WCF 28.1), exhibited (WCF 28.5), conferred (WCF 28.5), applied (WSC 92), and communicated (WSC 91). Nevertheless, the Standards also put the usual qualifications on this kind of efficacy, lest we fall into bare formalism or antinomianism. The promise only holds good for "worthy receivers" (27.3), that is, believers. The objective blessings are only realized by faith. To put it paradoxically, baptism saves, but not all the baptized are saved.

Further, the Westminster divines were more concerned than the earlier confessional writers to integrate sacramental efficacy into a strong doctrine of predestination and unconditional election. And so we have this qualifier found in 28.6: "The grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time." In other words, while the sacraments genuinely offer Christ to all who are baptized, and confer Christ upon those who receive the sacrament in faith, our response to baptism is part of God's eternal counsel. The objective meaning of baptism is not softened, but our subjective response determines what we actually get from the sacrament. And that response is subject to God's foreordination. Baptism is the offer; faith is the receptor. If we receive baptism in faith, it is because of his eternal election (that is to say, faith is a gift, given through the Word and sovereign work of the Spirit, per WCF 14.1). If we do not exercise faith, it is because of his eternal reprobation. Everything is ultimately conditioned by the counsel of his will, however mysterious that may be. The Confession leaves ambiguous the relation of covenantal promises to divine sovereignty.

Nevertheless, the Westminster divines have given us a strong doctrine of the instrumental efficacy of baptism. Baptism is not in competition with faith because baptism is what God does, while faith is what we do. Baptism is God's instrument in giving new life and forgiveness; faith is the instrument on our side for receiving these things. The person baptized has every reason to exercise faith, and no excuse for not doing so. After all, his baptism is "unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his engrafting into Christ, or regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Christ Jesus, to walk in newness of life" (28.1). The Confession is very clear: every baptized person should regard himself as a member of the covenant of grace and united to Christ. The imperative ("Improve your baptism! Live faithful to the covenant!") is grounded in the indicative ("You have been united to Christ!"). In other words "Improve your baptism" amounts to saying, "Be who you are!" Note that the benefits listed in 28.1 are spoken of in reference to the administration of baptism and the covenant, not to eternal election, which remains secret to us (cf. Dt. 29:29). In other words, they are objective and applicable, in principle, to every baptized person. The blessings belong to the one baptized, regarded as a member of the visible church, not as someone who is "secretly elect" or "genuinely regenerate." (This just reiterates the earlier views of Calvin and Bucer, both of whom insisted that the promise of baptism has reference to the covenant as such, not to the secret decree. It's also just another way of "viewing election through the lens of the covenant," as Norm Shepherd was apt to put it.)

Every baptized person has the duty to improve his baptism precisely because every baptized person has received a genuine offer of grace in the administration of baptism. It would do no good to encourage a person to draw strength and assurance from his baptism, as the Larger Catechism does, unless you were certain that his baptism was efficacious. It would do no good to tell a person to live in light of their union with Christ, in his death and resurrection, unless you were sure that every baptized person, head for head, was united to Christ in baptism. The logic of "improving one's baptism" requires us to believe that every baptized person has been joined to Christ objectively.

I should briefly comment on this language of "improving" upon baptism because it is an awkward expression and could easily cause confusion. The divines did not intend to suggest that we could add something of ours to baptism, thus making it "better." Baptism, as already noted, is complete in itself, and depends upon God's promise and grace, not our works. Rather, "improving" baptism means entering into the fullness of what God has offered and conferred in baptism. It means living on the basis of and out of one's baptism. Of course, this is just another way of saying we live on the basis of God's promises, because that's what baptism is – an enacted promise.

The "sign and seal" language of the confession cannot be used to cancel out the stronger "effectual means" language, for both strands are found within the document. This shapes our whole understanding of what it means for baptism to function as a sign and a seal. It cannot be an empty rite, a mere picture. As a sign, it functions more like an effective speech act. As a seal, it functionally applies the benefits of Christ and the covenant. "Sign and seal" language again emphasizes the objectivity of the sacraments.

According to the Standards, some functions of baptism happen "automatically." Every baptized person joins the visible church – the kingdom, house, and family

of God (WCF 25.2). In other words, the Confession implicitly views baptism as an adoption ritual, as the one baptized is inserted into the family of God. All baptized persons receive, objectively, the same promised inheritance and privileges. Some form of the gift of the Spirit must be implicitly conferred, since the house of God – the temple – is indwelt by the Spirit. According to the Confession, God “lives” in the visible church, meaning he lives within its members. A baptized person is a mini-tabernacle; he may defile his house, such that God has to move out, as he did with the old covenant tabernacle (cf. Ezek. 8, 1 Cor. 6), but baptism’s objective meaning remains unstained by our pollution. Even some kind of baptismal regeneration doctrine can be derived from this view of the visible church, since only those born again enter into the kingdom. Baptism marks the transition into a new life in the kingdom. All the baptized are enrolled and sworn into Christ’s army; we are obligated to fight manfully under the banner of our baptism into union with him as our Lord and King.

This description of the visible church in 25.2 also provides the basis for a quite robust view of apostasy. Those who abandon the church or get excommunicated are disinherited from the Triune family, expelled from the kingdom of Christ, and removed from the Spirit-indwelt house. We can add that they are amputated from the body of Christ (PCA BCO 2-2). These blessings were genuinely possessed by the church member, and were actually lost when he apostatized. In other words, these “common operations of the Spirit” (WCF 10.4), that are undifferentiated within the covenant community, belong (however contingently) to all baptized persons, though they can be forfeited by unbelief.

This is an old Reformed view, not a Westminsterian innovation. Calvin, as we’ve already noted, could write that baptism is a symbol and instrument of regeneration and that the substance of baptism belongs to our children, even while also granting the possibility that those baptized, “by their depravity, make it void to themselves” (Geneva Catechism). In other words, Calvin made room for a defectible regeneration, a regeneration that was offered but not received, all the while insisting upon God’s sovereign salvation and preservation of his chosen ones. More scholastic versions of Calvinism have squeezed out this doctrine of apostasy, but it was there from the beginning.

Another way to parse this out is to remember that “irresistible grace” works mysteriously. We cannot explain how God works to shape and change the human heart so that we are “made willing by His grace” (WCF 10.1; cf. 9.1-5). Baptism’s grace, objectively considered, is not irresistible. But in the elect, God works irresistibly so that they receive what is offered in baptism. Many Reformed theologians have made the mistake of using predestination to call into question the efficacy of the sacraments. But it would be better – more biblical as well as more confessional – to use predestination to explain why some respond to the objective offer and conferral of grace in baptism and why some refuse it. Predestination does not alter the meaning and significance of baptism; predestination determines how we will respond to the gift of Christ and the new status that are bound up in *every* administration of baptism. In other words predestination does not mean that some baptisms have objective efficacy, while others are just empty rituals; rather predestination means that some will receive what baptism confers in faith, while others will reject it in unbelief.

So, we conclude that the Westminster Standards give us a high view of baptism that is objective, covenantal, and efficacious. The benefits of the new covenant are offered to all who are baptized; they are received in truth and

applied in full to believers (cf. WSC 92). Every baptized person joins the kingdom, family, and house of God; but only worthy receivers maintain those blessings and experience their ultimate realization. Drawing assurance from baptism is not resting in ritual, but drawing strength from the promises of God and his ordinary means (WCF 18.2-3). In other words, sacramental assurance is just another dimension of the assurance of faith and another aspect of “improving” one’s baptism.

The Loss of Baptismal Efficacy

This high, instrumental view of baptism has been largely lost today, but it was the general view at the time of the Protestant Reformation. Some today set *sola fide* over against baptismal efficacy. R. C. Sproul’s analysis of the Tridentine doctrine of justification goes just this route. While rightly criticizing Rome’s defective views of baptism and justification, Sproul ignores the classic Reformed alternative:

During the Reformation one point of dispute focused on the *instrumental cause* of justification. Rome declared there are two instrumental causes of justification: the first is the sacrament of baptism, the second is the sacrament of penance. Therefore, Rome could speak of justification *by* the sacraments. By and through the sacraments the grace of justification is received. The sacraments are the *means by which* justifying grace is received. In the Reformation formula, “Justification by faith alone,” the word *by* captures the idea and communicates the notion that *faith*, not the sacraments, is the instrumental cause of justification. Faith is the instrument by which we are linked to Christ and receive the grace of justification (*Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*, 75; cf. also 122f).

What Sproul has overlooked is the two sides of instrumentality: objective and subjective. Baptism and faith are not instruments at the same level, or in the same way. Faith is the exclusive instrument in receiving what God instrumentally offers in baptism. Anthony Lane explains the problem with Sproul’s view:

The Tridentine *Decree on Justification* associates baptism with justification. The transition from our natural state in Adam to a state of grace in Christ ‘cannot occur without the washing of regeneration or the desire for it,’ John 3:5 being cited as evidence (ch. 4). In the process of preparation for justification, faith, hope and love are followed by repentance and the resolve to receive baptism, Acts 2:38 and Matthew 28:19f. being cited (ch. 6). The instrumental cause of justification is baptism, the sacrament of faith (ch. 7) ... Tracey takes exception to the statement that the gift of salvation is granted ‘by the action of the Holy Spirit in baptism’ asking, ‘Which is it, faith or baptism?’ His quarrel here is not with Trent nor with the *Joint Declaration* but with the New Testament, which repeatedly ascribes salvation and its components to baptism [Lane cites several passages in a footnote, e.g., Acts 2:38, 22:16; Rom. 6:3f.; Gal. 3:27; Col. 2:11f; 1 Pet. 3:21]. The clear answer of the New Testament to Tracey’s question is ‘not faith *or* baptism but faith *and* baptism’. This may not accord with the view of the majority of Evangelicals today but they should take up their complaint with the apostles. This majority too often speaks as if a purely symbolic view of the sacraments were the, rather than an, Evangelical position. They should also recognize that they have moved from the position of the Reformers (except for Zwingli) and for them the gap with Rome has widened, not narrowed, at this point. Sproul likewise interprets the *sola fide* formula as directed against baptism. But in the Reformation context the formula was consistently directed against works, not against baptism. Both Luther and Melancthon reject the slanderous claim that *sola fide* was intended to exclude word or *sacrament*. Calvin objects to the reference to baptism alone at the end of chapter 4 of the Tridentine decree asking, ‘Would it not have been better to say, that by the word *and sacraments* Christ is communicated, or, if they prefer so to speak, applied to us, than to make mention of baptism alone?’ ... It should also be remembered that Lutherans believing in baptismal regeneration are some of the most ardent proponents of justification by faith alone. The efficacy of the sacraments is an issue on which there is

as much diversity within Evangelicalism as between Evangelicals and Rome. The relationship between outward rite and inward reality is a complex issue on which there are a range of possible views. That the outward rite automatically conveys the inward reality and that it is merely symbolic of it are the two extreme views, not the only options. In any case the question of the efficacy of the sacraments is distinct from that of justification and should not be allowed to cloud the present issue. [Lane adds in a footnote: Some Evangelicals make the very odd accusation that baptism is a 'work'. This is profoundly mistaken. Baptism is not something we do, it is something we receive, something that is done to us. We 'are baptized' -- a passive verb. If anything could be called something that we do it is faith (we 'believe' -- active verb), not baptism. Of course, baptism is requested and adults at least are not baptized involuntarily, but baptism with the pattern of request and passive reception expresses vividly the manner in which salvation is a gift of grace to be received, not something to be earned by performing a work.] The *Joint Declaration* identifies the sacraments as a topic needing 'further clarification' (Section 43) ...

The Reformers (unlike many of today's Evangelicals) were happy to acknowledge the role of the sacraments in appropriating salvation. But for them the sacraments clearly occupy a secondary role, relative to faith. For traditional Roman Catholicism, however, the sacramental system is central ... There are indications that the polarization is becoming less pronounced today than in some past generations. The Second Vatican Council teaches little about the sacraments, but it does seek to integrate them with faith, especially in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. 'Before people can come to the liturgy, they must be called to faith and conversion' through the proclamation of the message of salvation. The sacraments 'not only presuppose faith; they also nourish it, strengthen it and express it, both through words and through objects. This is why they are called sacraments of faith.' There is a greater emphasis in Roman Catholicism today on the need for a personal faith, on the inadequacy of merely conforming to the ritual. As Catholics take more seriously the role of faith, Evangelicals also need to be more open to the role given to baptism in the New Testament.

Lane has provided an accurate assessment of the Reformers' understanding of the faith/baptism/justification nexus, as it was understood in the sixteenth century. The Reformers did not use *sola fide* (or even *sola gratia*) to cancel out sacramental efficacy. The sacraments did not compete with faith for center stage any more than preaching. Rather, as in preaching, so in the sacraments, God offers Christ to us. Baptism has reference to justification precisely because God has promised to make Christ available in the rite (as well as the other means of grace). But to receive forgiveness in baptism, one must receive Christ in faith.

Acts 2:38 is very clear regarding the instrumental role of baptism. The Greek grammar bears the point out well. Peter announces, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Repentance (inclusive of, or conjoined with faith, of course) is the human action called for. This verb is second person plural and is in the active voice. "Be baptized" is third person singular and in the passive voice, indicating baptism is the action of Another. No one baptizes himself, as if it were a work; it comes from the outside, as a gift. The singular probably indicates the corporateness of the baptism; that is to say, through baptism, the one baptized comes to share in the once-and-for-all Pentecostal event of Acts 2 and receives the gift of the Spirit given to the new temple/new Israel. The preposition "for" in the phrase "for the remission of your sins" indicates instrumentality: baptism has reference to remission. While word order is not determinative in Greek, surely it is significant that baptism is sandwiched *between* repentance and forgiveness. Peter did not say, "Repent for the forgiveness of sins, and be baptized as a sign that this has happened." Instead he links repentance and baptism as a package deal: by repenting from sin, and submitting to God's act of baptism, they would receive the forgiveness of sins. If they repent, they will receive baptism, and in receiving baptism,

they will receive (by faith) full remission. Baptism is instrumental in one way; faith/repentance in another.

Will the Real Baptism Please Stand Up?

Thus, we have seen that baptism's efficacy is *objective*. Baptism, like the other outward means of grace through which Christ communicates himself and his benefits to us (cf. WSC 85, 88), is a genuine offer of new life and reconciliation. Baptism's efficacy is also *instrumental*; it has no power in its own right. There is nothing magical about it. God has simply promised to work in it and through it. His Word makes it effective. Finally, baptism's efficacy is *conditional*. While baptism is what it is, even apart from our response, baptism's proffered blessings only come to realization in our lives if we respond in faith. It is a blessing, in a strictly objective sense, to everyone who receives it, since it confers membership in the kingdom, house, and family of God. But that blessing devolves into curse if there is no subjective appropriation of Christ by faith.

Understanding this point helps us avoid a common, but serious, error in contemporary Reformed theology. Sometime theologians have given the impression, intentionally or inadvertently, that there are two baptisms: one for the elect, one for the non-elect; or, one for infants, one for adults. But this is a flat violation of both God's Word and the Reformed tradition. The best of our Reformed heritage insists that water baptism itself is efficacious, for, in fact, it is an act of God. Indeed, as Hughes Oliphant Old has shown, turning baptism into an exclusively human work actually stems from the Anabaptist tradition:

For the Anabaptist baptism was a sign given by the one baptized of a decision he had made. It was a human sign of a human act. The contrast between the voluntarist approach of the Anabaptists which puts the emphasis on the decision of the convert and the Reformed emphasis on grace which sees salvation primarily in terms of God's saving act . . . [B]aptism was an integral part of their whole theology . . . [B]aptism of infants was a logical corollary to *sola gratia* (*The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century*, 138).

Ephesians 4:8 states emphatically that there is one baptism. This is a multi-faceted claim on the part of the apostle. It indicates several truths simultaneously. First, this text weighs against the practice of rebaptism. There is *one* baptism: having received it, there is no need for anyone to seek out another baptism. Because baptism's validity depends upon God's promise, not our worthiness, subsequent sin does not vitiate or destroy baptism. Unlike the Lord's Supper, which is administered repeatedly, baptism is a one time initiation ritual. To baptize someone a second time would cast a shadow of doubt upon the promise and testimony of God.

Second, there is one baptism that sums up the meaning of the multiple old covenant baptisms. The Levitical system included several washings – for priestly ordination and routine service, for worshippers who contracted some uncleanness, for sacrifices, and so forth. All of these various baptismal rites (cf. Heb. 9:10) are folded into the one baptism of the new age, just as the various old covenant feasts and meals have been taken up into the one celebration of the Lord's Supper. The baptism of the new economy is eschatological; it fulfills and transcends the baptisms of the old order. But it should be noted that these Old Covenant washings were effectual at the level of that covenantal administration. For example, to contract uncleanness in Israel was to be symbolically dead. It meant that one was excluded from the liturgical life of the nation. To be restored to life, one underwent a baptism;

hence, we may say these Levitical washings were types and shadows of the “washing of regeneration” (Tit. 3:5) that we have received in Christ.

Third, there is one baptism in that all Christian baptism is based upon and derives from Christ’s baptism. He is the true priest, ordained in the waters of the Jordan; he is true sacrifice, washed by John himself (a member of the priestly tribe); he is the one who has taken our uncleanness upon himself in order to bear it away forever. Jesus’ baptism fulfills all previous baptisms and baptismal events. All subsequent baptismal events (the cross, Pentecost) and baptisms (Mt. 28:18-20) are simply extensions and applications of his baptism in the Jordan.[12]

But, fourth, most importantly for our purposes, Paul’s language of one baptism resists the modern tendency to split baptism into “ritual baptism” and “spiritual baptism.” I take this as self-evident in the passage: if Paul has in view a “secret baptism,” how could we know who to seek unity with? Paul, in other words, insists on a unity of the rite and the Spirit’s work. God does something Spiritual through physical means. This has a couple of very significant implications.

First, it means that adults and infants receive the same baptism, objectively considered. In other words, there is only one initiation ritual for those who enter the covenant people. If anything, infant baptism should be regarded as the norm above adult baptism, given Jesus’ words about the kingdom in Mt. 18:4. Adults must become like children to enter the kingdom, not vice versa. To put it another way, *all baptism is paedobaptism*. Whatever baptism confers upon adults, in principle, it confers upon infants as well – and vice versa. To be sure, adults profess their faith in a way that infants cannot yet do, but the infant has a promise from God to stand in place of his own profession. And baptism isn’t about our profession anyway; it’s not a sign of our promises to God (first and foremost) but of his promises to us.

Second, this means that elect and non-elect persons receive the same baptism. Or, to put it another way, this means those who persevere in the covenant and those who break the covenant received the same baptism. This runs counter to Abraham Kuyper and some Dutch theologians who insisted that the elect received true baptisms, while the non-elect only received apparent baptisms. If that were the case, of course, no baptismal promises could be trusted because only the decree would matter. While we affirm God’s absolute sovereignty in salvation, objectively speaking, both elect and non-elect persons receive the same offer and conferral in baptism – just as they objectively hear the same sermon when the Word goes forth. There is *one baptism*, with *two divergent responses* (faith and unbelief). The elect person will “improve” his baptism and persevere to the end. The non-elect person will fall from grace, and lose the benefits set before him in baptism. Obviously there is mystery here – mystery that can be explained both at the level of God’s sovereignty as well as human responsibility. But we cannot let the outcome of a person’s baptism determine what that baptism meant originally. God’s promise, not our eventual response, makes baptism what it is. Those who violate the grace of baptism have no one to blame but themselves. Those who keep the baptismal covenant can only rejoice in what they were given.

This objective oneness of baptism means we should do away with all arguments based on some distinction between an outward, ceremonial baptism, and inner, “real” baptism. The “truly baptized” are not some “secret society” or “secret club” within the church. The “two baptisms” view collides with the best and

purest Reformed thought on the sacraments. The grace offered in baptism is undifferentiated, and this explains why there is so much “undifferentiated grace” language in the Bible (e.g., passages where those in the church are all addressed in the same terms and categories, despite the fact that not all will persevere). Various scholastic distinctions between “vital” and “legal” union or “external” and “internal” membership simply do not help exegetically or pastorally (though they may still have value theoretically). The same promises are made to *all* the baptized, and every baptized person is invited and encouraged to claim those promises as his own by faith. Every baptized person is summoned to think of himself, his identity and vocation, in terms of those baptismal declarations. The differentiation comes over time, as we find some people responding truly and faithfully to their baptism, and others rejecting the covenant blessings found in baptism.

Webb bifurcates baptism into two when he says, “Baptism is an external and visible sign of an inward spiritual reality and is a seal of the promises of the Covenant of Grace only to those whom the spirit either has already regenerated or will surely regenerate at some later date.” In other words, only the elect (those who are or will be regenerated in the reformed scholastic sense) can draw comfort from their baptism. But this gets hold of the question from the wrong end. If someone already knows he’s regenerate apart from baptism, how can baptism add to his assurance? And if someone doubts their election, what good are the promises of baptism, for they do not apply to all the baptized? Webb has voided baptism of any pastoral, assuring value. If some baptisms don’t objectively “take,” then all baptisms are suspect.

For Webb, what really counts is a “spiritual baptism” which he has unhinged from the outward rite: “[N]o external sign can grant [faith] for it is the work of the Spirit. It is circumcision of the heart that is needed which cannot be granted by the external washing of water.” But if baptism cannot give new life, why should we think that preaching can? Preaching is just as external as baptism. Preaching is words, baptism is water: the only reason either means is effectual is because of the Spirit’s work (WSC 89, 91).

Klaas Schilder is very helpful on these matters – especially since he had to deal head-on with Kuyperians. According to Jelle Faber, the Schilderites emphasize that *all* children of believers are children of the covenant and sanctified in Christ. The covenant promise of salvation is given to *all* these children. For *all* these children baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace or promise of salvation. As many of them who accept this promise by true faith, do so through the regenerating working of grace by the Holy Spirit, according to God’s eternal election. The others are breakers of the covenant and they will be punished with a more severe punishment (37)

[They reject Kuyper’s doctrine of] presumed regeneration at baptism (39) ... In John 15 the unfruitful branches – covenant members – are branches “in Christ,” organically united to him. Romans 11 designates the covenant members as branches which had become partakers of the root and fatness of the olive tree. The Lord may rightfully ask of covenant members: What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes (Isaiah 5)? These passages refer to a grace which does not insure salvation and yet takes from the covenant members all excuse . . . Christian nurture of covenant children was necessary, in order that they should not degenerate. Parents, teachers, and ministers do not deal with “unfit material,” with children who are completely blind and deaf spiritually, but with covenant children in whom the Lord has so worked that He may expect fruits of faith and repentance (40-1).

One quasi-Schilderite, Heyns, “went so far as to speak of a subjective covenant of grace for all members of the covenant so that man’s total incapacity by nature for things that are of the Spirit of God is taken away, that there is in the covenant child an initial or incipient capacity of covenantal nurture” (41). Schilder himself emphasized that baptism came with promises, not predictions. The covenant was absolutely gracious, but also conditional. The elect are not mere “stocks and blocks;” they have to willingly and freely fulfill the obligations God has imposed upon them. Schilder is thoroughly pastoral in the way he frames the covenant-election relationship. He points out that what we need is not a statement of facts about the elect, but a promise from God addressed to us as elect. “What I need is an *address* to me. In the promise of the gospel I do not receive a dogmatic lecture about God’s usual dealing with the elect, for even the devil can tell me that . . . I want to hear something that was addressed to me when I was earnestly called” (140). He goes on, explaining the point in terms of the liturgy; “When the Form for Baptism declares that, by baptism, God makes promises to us it clearly says, ‘He makes promises to *this by-name-mentioned-child*.’ He can safely say this and also teach this to us, because the promise goes hand in hand with the demand” (143). God does not give us dogma at the font; he gives us a promise, spoken to us by name, and authorized in his name. Schilder insists that the baptismal promise is always kept, though we must remember it is a two-sided promise. If a person fails to respond to baptism with faith, we should not conclude that God did not promise anything to that person; instead we should keep in mind that he promised nothing without the threat (151). [All Faber and Schilder quotations taken from *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism and Extra-Scriptural Binding – A New Danger* by Jelle Faber and Klaas Schilder.]

While I would not put everything just the way Schilder does, his approach has a lot to offer. It keeps together the sign and the thing signified in every baptism because it insists that the sure Word of God makes baptism what it is. The Word constitutes baptism; faith receives the Word in baptism.

The strongest argument for severing water baptism from Spirit baptism derives from a certain way of reading Rom. 2:25-29. The argument runs thus: Paul says circumcision is only outward, not a circumcision of the heart; baptism is the new covenant equivalent of circumcision; therefore baptism is only outward. But this ignores the redemptive historical nature of Paul’s argument. Circumcision and baptism are not equivalents. To be sure, baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant, and in that sense fulfills circumcision. But baptism has a much wider meaning; it fulfills several other rites and events of the old era in addition to circumcision. Or, to put it another way, circumcision was still a pre-Messianic ritual, a sign of the coming Seed; baptism is an eschatological sign, an indication that the Seed and Spirit have now entered history. Therefore, baptism includes a power and efficacy that circumcision could not possess. Insofar as baptism is a sign and seal of the *new* and better covenant (Jer. 31; Ezek. 36), it offers what circumcision could not (namely the Spirit and full forgiveness). Indeed, if anything, we might be driven to conclude from Col. 2:11-15 that baptism just is the offer of a circumcised heart (cf. Rom. 2:29), the thing Israel most needed (cf. Dt. 30; the circumcised heart was a promised, post-exilic, eschatological gift).

In Rom. 2, Paul is not drawing an absolute antithesis between the inward and the outward. That would violate the unity of body and soul found elsewhere in biblical theology. Rather, Paul is showing that the Jews, by their stubborn unbelief and rebellious idolization of Torah and their national privileges, have pried apart the sign and thing signified. The efficacy of the sacraments is conditional, after all – the offered blessings must be received by faith, which then manifests itself in obedience. Paul is condemning Israel precisely for her lack of faithfulness (cf. Rom. 3:1-4). And yet, Israel’s unbelief puts God’s own trustworthiness on the line; thus Paul shows throughout the letter that God has acted righteously and kept the promises. God has been true to the covenant; he has fulfilled what circumcision stood for by sending the Christ into the world as the promised Seed of the woman and Son of David.

But Israel has rejected the Messiah and is now guilty of covenant breaking. She has rejected God's way of covenant keeping in Christ. To cling to the sign of circumcision, without faith in the one who fulfills the promise of circumcision, is utter folly. Paul is simply identifying Israel as a covenant breaking people. But, of course, it is only because they have been circumcised that they were covenant members in the first place. Hyperbolically speaking, Jews have become non-Jews because they have denied the purpose of their election. Rom. 2, then, still stands as a warning to the baptized: be faithful to the covenant or face the wrath of God. But in context, it also provides hope: the old covenant was removed precisely because it could not bring about en masse faithfulness on the part of Israel. The new covenant, in the Spirit, will do what the old could not, in the letter. Thus, baptism should not be plugged into Rom. 2 in the place of circumcision in a simplistic manner; to get Paul's theology of baptism, we should fast forward ahead to Rom. 6. (It becomes obvious in that context that baptism and circumcision are not absolutely interchangeable since no one would think of inserting circumcision for baptism in that passage.)

To come at this whole issue from another direction, we should not say that baptism joins some to the visible church and others to the invisible church. That might be true in a highly theoretical sense, but, again, our decisions and evaluations must be governed by what we can see, not by things that are known only by God (Dt. 29:29). In terms of the Westminster Confession, there is one church with two aspects: historical and eschatological. The invisible church is not a secret organization within the visible church, but the future church, the church in its final, glorified form, composed of all of the saved over the whole course of history (WCF 25.1; note the language: the catholic, or universal church is invisible because it contains the "whole number of the elect," including those not yet born).

To sum up: baptism is an action of God in the church in which union with Christ and all the blessings of the new covenant are conferred and applied (cf. WLC 162-3). It is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, through which we are admitted to the church and through which salvation is effectually bestowed upon believers (WSC 91-94). Christ is present in the sacrament by his Word and Spirit to communicate the benefits of redemption to worthy receivers (WCF 28). This is the only baptism there is in the new covenant.

Church Membership as a Soteriological Fact

Some might think: so, baptism joins the one baptized to the church – big deal! After all, church membership is just an outward thing, unrelated to the deepest core of a person's being. It's an external relationship, one more thing to strip away (like layers of onion) in getting at the real core of someone's personality.

Peter Leithart has argued quite effectively against this view, showing that church membership is in fact a soteriological fact. The argument can be found in several places, most clearly, perhaps, in his essay "Trinitarian Anthropology: Toward a Trinitarian Re-casting of Reformed Theology" in the book *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons*, edited by Calvin Beisner. Leithart's dissertation, *The Priesthood of the Plebs*, should also be consulted, since it ties in baptism with the church, salvation, and personhood. I will not simply repeat Leithart's work here, only add a few thoughts to the matter to make a point that I think has been overlooked.

I think a key reason high views of baptismal efficacy have proved controversial in American Presbyterianism is that we have drifted into a rather low ecclesiology. We have pried apart the church and salvation. Most of our time spent debating over the “efficacy of the sacraments” should probably be spent exegeting NT texts on the nature of the church. To put it in confessional terms, I do not think we have taken seriously enough WCF 25.2. The visible church into which one is admitted in baptism is no mere human organization. Rather, it is, “the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God.” These categories are clearly soteriological, even if we must add that bare membership in the church is not enough to save apart from a corresponding life of faithfulness (keep in mind the objective/subjective distinction). Kingdom subjects can rebel, the house can become defiled, and family members can be disinherited. Nevertheless, to be in the church is to be in the place of grace and salvation.

Think through a few examples. Suppose I walk into a room full of Reformed, confessional theologians and say, “Hey, fellows, I believe baptism is the means by which one is made a member of the kingdom of Christ!” It might raise quite a protest. After all, someone might suggest that only those born again enter the kingdom of God (Jn. 3)! But in truth, I have done nothing more than put WCF 25.2 and 28.1 together.

Or, to play it out again, suppose I walk into the room and say, “Hey guys, I think in baptism, we are admitted to the house and family of God,” someone might want to ask, “Hey, are you saying that everyone who gets baptized is actually a part of God’s house, the new covenant temple that is made of living stones and is said to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit? Are you saying every baptized person is a child of God? Really?” Things might get pretty interesting – even heated. But, again, I would have only parroted the Confession.

Those three categories found in 25.2 -- kingdom, house, and family -- cover a lot of ground theologically, and carve out more than enough space for everything I want to say about baptism’s efficacy. To say it again: Questions about baptismal efficacy are not simply questions about baptism per se; they are also questions about the community one enters into in baptism. Our current debates are about ecclesiology every bit as much as they are about sacramental theology. Or to put it another way, ecclesiology and sacramental theology are correlated to one another.

Let’s spell this out a bit further. Every person baptized is “automatically” (or “irresistibly”) put into the kingdom, house, and family. So viewing baptism as an adoption rite into the Triune family, for example, is entirely confessional, even though the Standard’s teaching on baptism does not make that very explicit. I would think some kind of baptismal regeneration is bound up in viewing the church as the “kingdom of Christ.” After all, only those born again can enter the kingdom, but everyone baptized *is* inserted into the kingdom in at least some sense. Some form of the gift of the Spirit must also be conferred in baptism. If the one baptized is made a member of God’s house, surely God dwells in that house by his Spirit! God lives in the “visible” church -- a fact which has implications for how we understand what it means to enter into the church via baptism.

25.2 can also be used to derive a pretty robust theology of apostasy. This is important because a doctrine of genuine apostasy must also be the correlate of a high view of baptismal efficacy. Those who abandon the church and are excommunicated are disinherited from the Triune family, cast out of the kingdom of Christ, and removed from the Spirit-indwelt house. But those blessings really were theirs prior to apostasy. The confession says so. They must make up the “common operations of the Spirit” mentioned in WCF 10.4; that is, they are undifferentiated blessings that belong to *all* covenant members, though they can be forfeited by unbelief.

Can we then sum up how all this fits together? In baptism we are brought

covenantally and publicly out of union with Adam and into union with Christ. When this occurs, one is “born again,” not in the sense we have come to speak of “regeneration” as an irresistible, irreversible change of heart, but in the covenantal sense of being brought out of Adam’s family into God’s family. In baptism, we are united to Christ by faith, and therefore to the Triune God. Having been admitted to the fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit, this new relationship, like any other relationship, requires fidelity and love. This doesn’t mean we maintain our end of the covenant in our own strength; God provides that as well. But it does mean that there is such a thing as covenant keeping and covenant breaking. All covenant members are encouraged to rely on God’s promises and trust him for the gift of perseverance.

In this relationship, one has, in principle, all the blessings and benefits in the heavenly places delivered over to him as he is “in Christ.” We’ve already noted that baptism is like an adoption ceremony. The adopted child is brought into a new relationship, given a new name, new blessings, a new future, new opportunities, a new inheritance – in short, a new life. And yet these blessings, considered from the standpoint of the covenant rather than the eternal decree, are mutable. The child is a full member of the family and has everything that comes with sonship. But, if he grows up and rejects his Father and Mother (God and the church), if he refuses to repent and return home when warned and threatened, then he loses all the blessings that were his. It would not be accurate to say that he never had these things; he did possess them, even though he never experienced or enjoyed some of them. By refusing to abide in covenant, he faces a more severe judgment than others who were never admitted to the family, or given such rich and gracious promises.

This fits precisely with the way the church is addressed in Scripture. For example, Paul can say that all who are members of Christ have new creation life. They are justified, washed, sanctified, and so on. All these things are theirs “in Christ.” But, like Israel of old, the church must persevere faithfully in these things. If we renounce the Savior, refuse to repent, and fall away from the faith, we lose all these blessings that were ours “in Christ” -- and we lose them, because they are only ours “in Christ,” not outside of Him.

None of this touches upon a Calvinistic view of God’s sovereign decree. Entrance into covenant via baptism, with subsequent perseverance by some and final apostasy by others, are both included in God’s decree. We don’t know what God has planned in the end for any individual until it happens. Under God’s decree, we can insist that only those predestined for ultimate resurrection glory will be preserved in true faith and repentance until the end. But note how Scripture describes apostates. It does not deny that they were truly blessed in the covenant relationship while it lasted. Nor does it always ascribe their apostasy to God’s sovereign purposes (though it does do that!). It speaks of apostates as those who trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace. They are among those who received the grace of God in vain. They have forgotten that they were cleansed from their former sins and had once escaped the pollutions of the world. Their names are blotted out of the book of life. All of this works out in accordance with God’s eternal decree, even though apostates must take full responsibility for their actions.

The Status of Covenant Children

Related to the question of baptismal regeneration is the issue of the status of a covenant child. How should we regard a baptized child? As a non-Christian in need of conversion when he comes of age? As a little heathen? Or as a Christian, albeit an immature one, who shares the same covenant status and

privileges as his parents and every other member of the church? Should a child be exhorted to close with Christ for the first time? Or should he be encouraged to “improve his baptism” and persevere in the grace he’s already received (cf. WLC 167)? Can we in good faith teach our children the Lord’s Prayer (“Our Father”) and “Jesus Loves Me”?

This is not the first time these questions have become a matter of controversy. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Hodge (representing northern Presbyterianism) and James Henley Thornwell (representing southern Presbyterianism) squared off in debate over precisely this issue. In part, the controversy concerned whether or not baptized children should be regarded as already under church censure until they manifest repentance, or potentially subject to church censure should they manifest rebellion. Are baptized children guilty until they prove themselves innocent, or innocent until proven guilty?

Without going into great detail, Hodge argued convincingly that covenant children should be regarded as fellow Christians and believers. Parents should apply a model of “covenant nurture” rather than the paradigm of revivalistic conversionism. Hodge’s essay on covenant nurture included these thoughts on parental nurture (emphasis added):

[It is] a scriptural truth that the children of believers are the children of God; as being within his covenant with their parents, he promises to them his Spirit; he has established a connection between faithful parental training and the salvation of children, as he has between seed-time and harvest, diligence and riches, education and knowledge. In no one case is absolute certainty secured or the sovereignty of God excluded. But in all, the divinely appointed connection between means and end, is obvious.

That this connection is not more apparent, in the case of parents and children, is due in great measure, to the sad deficiency in parental fidelity. If we look over the Christian world, how few nominally Christian parents even pretend to bring up their children for God. In a great majority of cases the attainment of some worldly object is avowedly made the end of education; and all the influences to which a child is exposed are designed and adapted to make him a man of the world. And even within the pale of evangelical churches, it must be confessed, there is a great neglect as to this duty ...

We of course recognize the native depravity of children, the absolute necessity of their regeneration by the Holy Spirit, the inefficiency of all means of grace without the blessing of God. But what we think is plainly taught in Scripture, what is reasonable in itself, and confirmed by the experience of the church, is, that early, assiduous, and faithful religious culture of the young, especially by believing parents, is the great means of their salvation. *A child is born in a Christian family, its parents recognize it as belonging to God and included in his covenant. In full faith that the promise extends to their children as well as to themselves, they [give] their child to him in baptism.* From its earliest infancy it is the object of tender solicitude, and the subject of many believing prayers. The spirit which reigns around it is the spirit, not of the world, but of true religion. The truth concerning God and Christ, the way of salvation and of duty, is inculcated from the beginning, and as fast as it can be comprehended. The child is sedulously guarded as far as possible from all corrupting influence, and subject to those which tend to lead him to God. *He is constantly taught that he stands in a peculiar relation to God, as being included in his covenant and baptized in his name; that he has in virtue of that relation a right to claim God as his Father, Christ as his Saviour, and the Holy Ghost as his sanctifier; and assured that God will recognize that claim and receive him as his child, if he is faithful to his baptismal vows.* The child thus trained grows up in the fear of God; his earliest experiences are more or less religious; he keeps aloof from open sins; strives to keep his conscience clear in the sight of God, and to make the divine will the guide of his conduct. When he comes to maturity, the nature of the covenant of grace is fully explained to him, he intelligently and deliberately assents to it, publicly confesses himself to be a worshipper and follower of Christ, and acts consistently with his engagements. *This is no fancy sketch. Such an experience is not uncommon in actual life.* It is obvious that in such cases it must be difficult both for the person himself and for those around him, to fix on the precise period when he passed from death unto life. And even in cases, where there is more of a conflict, where the influence of early instruction has met with greater

opposition, and where the change is more sudden and observable, the result, under God, is to be attributed to this parental training ...

As this method of religious training has the sanction of a divine command, so it has also the benefit of his special promise. Success in the use of this means is the very thing promised to parents in the covenant into which they are commanded to introduce their children. *God, in saying that he will be their God, gives them his Spirit, and renews their hearts, and in connecting this promise with the command to bring them up for him, does thereby engage to render such training effectual.* Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it, is moreover the express assurance of his word. There is also a natural adaptation in all means of God's appointment, to the end they are intended to accomplish. There is an appropriate connection between sowing and reaping, between diligence and prosperity, truth and holiness, religious training and the religious life of children.

John Williamson Nevin argued the same points in his devastating critiques of revivalism, though he was more explicit in making baptism the foundation of such nurture. Robert Rayburn has demonstrated that this view of covenant children was the mainstream Reformed view in his fine essay "The Presbyterian Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture And Covenant Succession," available at <http://www.faithacomma.org/covenant.htm>. Hodge and Rayburn do not espouse the precise view of baptism enunciated by me in this essay, but the practical outworkings of their understanding of the place of covenant children is very similar. They both insist that we should parent in terms of the promises – that is to say, covenant children are to be regarded as full members of the people of God.[13]

Here is a catena of quotations I've collected over the years, Scriptural and historical, demonstrating that numerous Reformed theologians have rightly and biblically believed that baptized (and to some extent, even pre-baptized) children should be regarded as fellow Christians and should be reared accordingly (emphasis added):

- I believe that faithful parents can be sure that their children will be saved and go to heaven. This assurance is based on the promises of God to them and their families. There are conditions that parents are to meet, by God's grace, as the normal means to the salvation of their children. If parents abandon their responsibilities, then they have forsaken their agreement or covenant with God and have no reason to expect that the promises of God for their children's salvation will be fulfilled. Parents are to perform all their duties in a spirit of faith, looking to Jesus alone to make their efforts successful. Children are not saved because of their parents. They are saved by grace through the redemption of Jesus Christ. Christian parents are simply the channel through which the message of this salvation is normally conveyed. They most likely will be the tools God uses to bring the salvation offered in His Son to their children. Though most children rightly raised will be saved and grow in grace early in their lives, some may not follow Christ until later. In such rare cases, the promised salvation is received, but not as quickly as anticipated. -- Edward N. Gross
- God is so kind and liberal to his servants, as, for their sakes, to appoint even the children who shall descend from them to be enrolled among his people. -- John Calvin
- The child of a Christian parent is presumptively a Christian and an heir of eternal life ... Christian nurture beginning in infancy is the divine instrumentality of the salvation of the church's children ... [and] the primary method appointed for the propagating of the church ... I do not hesitate to claim that far and away the largest part of the Christian church at any time or place -- excepting that historical moment when the gospel first reaches a place and a people -- are those who were born and raised in Christian families and that this is true whether one is considering Christendom as an outward phenomenon or only the company of the faithful followers of Christ ... The biblical paradigm is for covenant children to grow up in faith from infancy. -- Robert Rayburn
- Baptized infants are to be received as children of God and treated accordingly. -- John Murray

- God pronounces that he adopts our infants as his children, before they are born, when he promises that he will be a God to us, and to our seed after us. This promise includes their salvation. -- John Calvin
- [The] family ... is the New Testament basis of the Church of God ... [God] does, indeed require individual faith for salvation; but He organizes His people in families first; and then into churches, recognizing in their very warp and woof the family constitution. His promises are all the more precious that they are to us and our children. And though this may not fit with the growing individualism of the day, it is God's ordinance. -- B. B. Warfield
- *The mere promise of God ought to be sufficient to assure us of the salvation of our children.* -- John Calvin
- The children of the faithful which are born in the Church are from their mother's womb of the household of the kingdom of God. -- John Calvin
- This principle should ever be kept in mind, that baptism is not conferred on children in order that they may *become* sons and heirs of God, but because they are *already* considered by God as occupying that place and rank, the grace of adoption is sealed in their flesh by the rite of baptism. -- W. Miller
- As soon as infants are born among them, the Lord signs them with the sacred symbol of baptism; they are therefore, in some sense, the people of God. -- John Calvin
- [We] do not assert their regeneration, or that they are truly members of Christ's body; we only assert that they belong to the class of persons whom we are bound to regard and treat as members of Christ's Church. *This is the only sense in which even adults are members of the Church, so far as men are concerned.* -- Charles Hodge
- The offspring of believers is born holy, because their children, while yet in the womb ... are included in the covenant of eternal life ... Nor ... are they admitted into the Church by baptism on any other ground than that *they belonged to the body of Christ before they were born.* -- John Calvin
- *The salvation of infants is included in the promise in which God declares to believers that he will be a God to them and to their seed ...* Their salvation, therefore, has not its commencement in baptism, but being already founded on the word, is sealed by baptism. -- John Calvin
- Here certainly appears the extraordinary love of our God, in that as soon as we are born, and just as we come from our mother, he hath commanded us to be solemnly brought from her bosom as it were into his own arms, that he should bestow upon us, in the very cradle, the tokens of our dignity and future kingdom ... that [he joins us] to himself in the most solemn covenant from our most tender years: the remembrance of which, as it is glorious and full of consolation to us, so in like manner it tends to promote Christian virtues, and the strictest holiness, through the whole course of our lives. Nothing ought to be dearer to us than to keep sacred and inviolable that covenant of our youth, that first and most solemn engagement, that was made to God in our name. -- Herman Witsius
- Infants are renewed by the Spirit of God, according to the capacity of their age, till that power which was concealed within them grows by degrees, and becomes fully manifest at the proper time. -- John Calvin
- The children of the godly are born the children of the Church, and ... they are accounted members of Christ from the womb, because God adopteth us upon this condition, that he may be also the Father of our seed. -- John Calvin
- But You are He who took Me out of the womb; You made Me trust while on My mother's breasts. -- Psalm 22:9
- [At the time of the Reformation], confessional status was granted to the affirmations that covenant children are Christians, that they are baptized because the power and substance of the sacrament belongs to them, that they

are heirs of the same blessing promised to their parents, that they are capable of regeneration and of the 'seed of faith,' and that, should they die in infancy, they are saved. -- Robert Rayburn

- But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, And His righteousness to children's children, To such as keep His covenant, And to those who remember His commandments to do them. -- Psalm 103:17-18
- The promise is made to believers and their seed; and that the seed and posterity of the faithful, born within the church, have, by their birth, interest in the covenant, and the right to the seal of it, and the outward privileges of the church . . . That children, by baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers; and that all who are baptized in the name of Christ, do renounce, and by their baptism are bound to fight against the devil, the world, and the flesh: *That they are Christians and federally holy before baptism.* -- The Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God
- Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call." Acts 2:38-39
- They also brought infants to Him that He might touch them; but when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to Him and said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." Luke 18:15-17
- ... if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. -- Titus 1:6
- It is God's will and declared purpose that his saving grace run in the lines of generations ... Imagine the contrary: that Christian parents brought children into the world with no confidence at all that the saving grace which had been pitched upon them -- among the comparatively few in all the world so favored -- would likewise be pitched upon their children, whom they love as they love life itself. Christian parents do not imagine themselves to be populating hell when they bring sons and daughters into the world! -- Robert Rayburn
- But did He not make them one, giving a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. -- Malachi 2:15
- And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you . . . For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him. -- Genesis 17:7; 18:19
- It must be plainly stated that the promise made to the children of the covenant is not that of a special status of privilege but is precisely the *promise of the gospel*, eternal life in heaven. Whether the form of the promise is that God should be their God (Gen. 17:7), or that he will extend to them his righteousness (Ps. 103:17), or his Spirit (Isa. 59:21), or his forgiveness (Acts 2:38-39), or his salvation (Acts 16:31), the covenant which thus embraces the children with their believing parents is the covenant of *grace*. -- Robert Rayburn
- By virtue of their sacramental initiation, of the requirement of their presence at renewals of the covenant (Deut 29:9-15; Joel 2:16), of their being addressed as among the saints and as part of the church with corresponding obligations (Eph 1:1; 6:1-3) of their holiness (1 Cor 7:14), of the kingdom of God being theirs (Matt 18:13-15), they are members of the church. All the more, given presumption of early faith, they meet the requirements of church membership. Another lovely and highly important way of making this point in Scripture is the Lord's practice of speaking of covenant children as *his* children (Ezek 16:20-21; Mal 2:15; cf.

Isa 29:23). It is again extraordinary how thoroughly rooted in evangelical culture has become the practice of covenant children 'joining the church' when Scripture provides neither instruction or illustration supportive of the practice but rather, in every way, regards such children as already part of the community of the saints from the beginning of their lives. Indeed, the recognition that covenant children are church members from their infancy, furnishes the simplest resolution of certain practical objections commonly raised against the doctrine of covenant succession. If, for example, it be objected that it cannot be known that a very little child is or will eventually become a faithful follower of Christ, it needs only be pointed out that, so far as human judgment is concerned, that uncertainty applies equally to those who enter the church from the world by profession of faith. Just as those who enter the church from the world, covenant children are required, as all church members, to grow up in the grace and knowledge of God and to live worthy of the calling they have received. As with older church members, other are appointed to help them do so. The immensely important consequence of this infant membership is that the duty of parents and the church becomes, thereby, to train their children to believe, feel, and live as becomes the children of God and members of his household, which they are! Especially parents, who are the masters of their children's thoughts in the formative years, are responsible to ensure that the children of the covenant grow up fully aware and appreciative of the promises which have been made to them by name and the summons which was issued to them at the headwaters of their lives. Surely one of the most dismal evidences of the debasement of this doctrine in Presbyterian churches is in the general insensibility of covenant children themselves to their status, their breathtaking privileges, and their sacred obligations. -- Robert Rayburn

- Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, give us such a seed! Give us a seed right with Thee! Smite us and our house with everlasting barrenness rather than that our seed should not be right with Thee. O God, give us our children. Give us our children. A second time, and by a far better birth, give us our children to be beside us in Thy holy covenant. For it had been better we had never been born; it had been better we had never been betrothed; it had been better we had sat all our days solitary unless our children are to be right with Thee ... But thou, O God, art Thyself a Father, and thus hast in Thyself a Father's heart. Hear us, then, for our children, O our Father . . . In season and out of season; we shall not go up into our bed; we shall not give sleep to our eyes nor slumber to our eyelids till we and all our seed are right with Thee. – A. Whyte
- God cannot resist a parent's prayer when it is sufficiently backed up with a parent's sanctification. -- A. Whyte
- Those who say that infancy has nothing in it for Jesus to save, are denying that Christ is Jesus for all believing infants. Those, I repeat, who say that infancy has nothing in it for Jesus to save, are saying nothing else than that for believing infants, infants that is, who have been baptized in Christ, Christ the Lord is not Jesus. After all, what is Jesus? Jesus means Savior. Jesus is the Savior. Those whom he doesn't save, having nothing to save in them, for them he isn't Jesus. Well now, if you can tolerate the idea that Christ is not Jesus for some persons who have been baptized, then I am not sure your faith can be recognized as according to the sound rule. Yes, they are infants, but they're his members (1 Cor. 12:27). They are infants, but they receive the sacraments. They are infants, but they share in his table, in order to have life in themselves (Jn. 6:53). – Augustine
- God has cast the line of election so it runs for the most part through the loins of godly parents. – C. Mather
- All this that we here suffer is through you! You should have taught us the things of God and did not! You should have restrained us from sin and corrected us and you did not! You were the means of our original corruption and yet you never showed any competent care that we might be delivered from it! Woe unto us that we had such carnal and careless parents! And woe unto you that have no more compassion and pity to prevent the everlasting misery of your own children! – C. Mather (depicting covenant breaking children speaking to their parents on judgment day)
- Better whipped than damned. – C. Mather (on the necessity of child discipline)

- A man with unbelieving children is a man with a defect which disqualifies him from the leadership of the church . . . nowhere does the Scripture suggest the contrary, that blameless parental nurture might still result in one's children growing up to a life of unbelief. -- Robert Rayburn
- For You are my hope, O Lord God; You are my trust from my youth. By You I have been upheld from birth; You are He who took me out of my mother's womb. My praise shall be continually of You. – Psalm 71:5-6
- At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. 4Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. Whoever causes one of these little ones *who believe in Me* to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea." – Mt. 18:2-6

Again, not every quotation here represents precisely the view of baptism argued for in this paper. But on the whole, these Scriptural passages and historic testimonies show that a wide swath of the church has held to the possibility, even the normativity, of infant faith and salvation within covenant families. Moreover, such parental nurture and instruction, based upon this covenantal status, is blessed by God and made effectual for securing growth and maturation in the faith. This is so important for us to see today, in an age in which many even in the Reformed church basically don't know how to view their children, or actually view them as rank outsiders. The covenant promises and baptism should form the foundation of our philosophy of parenting.

The Tangled Webb

What then are we to make of Webb's charges that I have espoused baptismal regeneration? Webb quotes me as saying, "Does God save or does baptism save?" poses a false dilemma. God saves through baptism; it is one of his instruments of salvation, along with the Word and the Eucharist." He then asks: "Surely, although these are quotes from men in good standing in Reformed denominations, this cannot be Reformed teaching? How can this be reconciled with what our Standards teach?" I would point to, among other places, WSC 88, in which baptism is identified as one of the "outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption." I think my teaching squares quite nicely with classical Reformed theology (though I happily admit there have always been a variety of views on these matters within the Reformed world).

Webb sees me as teaching that baptism is a "converting ordinance." I'm not sure that's quite right; or at least it's not that simple. After all, I do insist that faith is necessary to receive the grace of baptism. The argument here is much like the one examined earlier over "baptismal regeneration." Webb appealed to Hodge to show baptismal regeneration is unreformed; but, of course, Hodge was not seeking to refute anything like what I've articulated. The meaning of the term "baptismal regeneration" got switched in the middle of the argument, and so we're left comparing apples to oranges. Webb is plugging my statements into his (or Hodge's) framework, and an obvious heresy pops out (one we'd both reject).

I haven't used the language of baptism as "converting ordinance." What exactly does that terminology mean? Baptism is a sign and seal of God's covenant, not our conversion. Baptism is God's action; conversion (faith and repentance) is ours. Baptism doesn't *cause* conversion, per se. It's hard to tell just what Webb is driving at.

Now is the problem here due to my inability to communicate? Or to Webb's

inaccurate reading of my position? I am sure I could have said things better; that's why I put my views in public in the first place -- to be sharpened, to see how things could be said more faithfully and clearly. To parrot N. T. Wright, I am continuing my theological education in public – with all the hard knocks that come with that territory.

But I also think Webb's been a bit quick to pull the trigger before he really understood the placement of his target (and, of course, he isn't alone). Admittedly, this requires a bit of a “paradigm shift.” American Presbyterians have a hard time recovering what it means to speak of the efficacy of the sacraments in an instrumental fashion. It's very easy to plug my sorts of statements into a foreign framework, rather than grappling with them on their own terms. So I plead for patience, and more discussion. I even hope this paper will nudge the conversation forward a tiny bit.

That being said, I do think that Webb's view, though prevalent, is problematic. For example, Webb quotes Jeffrey Meyers: “Think about how we begin our Christian life among the assembled people of God when we are named and claimed by the Triune God at the baptismal font. The Father adopts us in his one and only Son by means of the washing of regeneration, giving us a new life in his redeemed family.” Then Webb comments: “If Reverend Myers is correct, and we have regeneration, adoption as Sons, and redemption via baptism, it will have inevitable repercussions on whether, for instance, we urge our children to close with Christ by faith alone. Why, after all, would we urge them to do something that has already occurred at the font?”

Webb has set out the issues nicely, but it's not at all clear to me that he really has the confessional high ground. For example, why shouldn't we urge our children to “improve their baptisms” rather than “close with Christ”? They were already sealed into Christ in baptism; it makes no sense to continue treating them as outsiders. Instead we need to urge them to seriously and thankfully consider the privileges and benefits conferred upon them in baptism, lest they walk contrary to the grace of baptism (WLC 167). Nothing in our confessional standards indicates that baptized children are in need of “conversion” to faith and repentance for the first time, as opposed to perseverance in faith and repentance already begun. If anything, covenant nurture, rather than covenant conversion, is the privileged paradigm in the Confession.[14] (Of course, I realize “conversion” can be used in the sense of life-long renewal in faith and repentance; in that sense both baptized adults and children need ongoing conversion.)

Webb explains how he perceives my concern and where I have gone wrong:

So what then is going on here? Men like Lusk have answered that what has happened is that modern Presbyterians have adopted “Gnostic” and “baptistic” theology and have abandoned the real efficacy of baptism in favor of an over-reliance on the word preached. They argue that we have corrupted the true meaning of baptism, that we have denuded it of its efficacy as a means of salvation due to baptistic, revivalistic, and rationalistic influences.

I certainly have not intentionally tried to de-value the preaching of the word. There is no reason why Word and sacrament should play a zero sum game against one another, in which focusing on one necessarily deprecates the other. In fact, in my essay, “Some Thoughts on the Means of Grace” (http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/some_thoughts_on_the_means_of_grace.htm), I sought to show that Word and sacrament are both indispensable and work together in God's economy of redemption. In that article, I followed Calvin in emphasizing that the preached Word is a genuine means of grace precisely because God works through – indeed, speaks through – the pastor as his ordained instrument.

I'm certainly not the first or only person to point out certain Gnostic tendencies in American Christianity, including Americanized Reformed theology

(see, e.g., Philip Lee's excellent expose, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*). I'm also not the first to suggest that American Presbyterianism has downplayed the sacraments to its detriment (see, e.g., Keith Mathison's *Given for You*). I think both revivalism and Enlightenment rationalism have taken a toll on our sacramental theology (see, e.g., James White's *Sacraments as God's Self-Giving*). I'm happy to reassess my understanding of the history of Reformed theology, and what's gone wrong, of course. But Webb doesn't provide any counter-evidence to the claim that there's been a "sacramental downgrade."

Interestingly, Webb admits that Calvin uses the language of baptismal regeneration: "Now, it is quite true that when one turns to Calvin and some of the continental Reformed theologians, there is indeed an unhappy tendency to use language in regard to infant baptism that would seem to imply that they are regenerated at the time of their baptism." This is an important concession; at the very least Webb is conceding that one can use "baptismal regeneration" language, properly articulated and defined, and still be Calvinistic. He writes,

[W]hile I am a great admirer of men like Calvin and Ursinus, they frequently make statements regarding the efficacy of the sacraments that either can be misunderstood or which do indeed, in the case of infants, seem to exceed the bounds of scripture ... [W]e would still be very foolish to suppose that Federal Vision advocates have no statements they can appeal to in the work of Calvin and the continental Reformed in order to support their even more sweeping sacramental theories.

Webb admits that he has chosen the Southern Presbyterian strand of Reformed theology as the best and purest. Webb's paper is important, because it shows that this is truly an intramural debate amongst Reformed brethren. That context should determine the tone of our conversation from beginning to end. In a sense the question comes down to this: Were the Southern Presbyterians justified in departing from Calvin's high sacramental theology? It's Thornwell and Dabney vs. Calvin and Bucer.

Webb identifies two errors he believes we've made: [1] confusing the sign and thing signified; and [2] supposing that sacraments are efficacious apart from faith. On point [1], I will simply point to my essay, already referenced, "Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy" in the *Federal Vision* book. On pages 97-102, I deal extensively with the sign and thing signified relationship, showing how the Reformed tradition understands the "sacramental union." I demonstrate (hopefully with some degree of conclusiveness) that the sign and the thing signified are to be distinguished without being separated. Ascribing efficacy to baptism is not ascribing efficacy to the external sign (water); it is ascribing efficacy to a rite performed in God's name and with his authorization and promise. My counter-question for Webb is simple: What are the parts (note the plural) of a sacrament? (cf. WLC 163). He seems to have defined the sacrament as a sign, without the thing signified; but the Reformed definition includes both. In other words, insofar as baptism is a sacramental act/event, every baptism includes both the outward sign and the thing signified. There's no such thing as a Spirit baptism without water, or a water baptism without the Spirit. Baptism = water + Spirit, by definition.

On point [2], I've repeatedly stressed the need for faith to receive what God gives in baptism in this paper. See also *The Federal Vision*, 103-107 and Appendix 2 to this essay. I simply do not think Webb's charges stick. I can fully agree with Webb's quotation from Ursinus ("The condition of faith is joined to the promise; for those who are baptized do not receive what is promised and sealed by baptism unless they have faith, so that without faith the promise is not ratified, and baptism is of no profit. In these words we have

expressed in a concise manner the proper use of baptism in which the sacraments are always ratified to those who receive them in faith; whilst the sacraments are no sacraments, and profit nothing in their improper use”) and Calvin (“But from this sacrament, as from all others, we gain nothing, unless in so far as we receive in faith”). The question I’d like to hear Webb answer is this: What can faith expect to receive in the rite of baptism? What is the believing heart warranted in expecting from God’s hand in the sacrament? If baptism is not the objective offer of forgiveness and a new life in Christ, what is it?

Webb is afraid that a high “sacramentalism” will lead to “nominalism,” and “thence on to liberalism amongst Protestants.” But, of course, low sacramental churches have been just as susceptible to nominalism as high sacramental churches – the nominalism just takes different forms. At this point, Webb actually sounds quite Baptist – after all, if nominalism is the basic problem that needs to be addressed, and the way to do so is through attenuating the sacraments, the pressure mounts to dispose with infant baptism altogether since it is the ultimate culprit in producing nominalism. Actually, there is a better way, found, again, in WLC 167. We don’t counter nominalism by telling people nothing of significance happened when they got baptized; instead, we remind them of all that God has sealed to them in the rite and call them to live accordingly. We then warn them of the grave dangers of apostasy, should they refuse to live out their baptisms in constant, persevering faith and repentance. The answer to nominalism is not a low sacramental theology; it’s vigorous exhorting (“Be who you are – dead to sin and alive to righteousness!”) and faithful church discipline.

Webb reveals his revivalistic impulses when he criticizes Ursinus and Calvin for believing that infants have faith:

The problem with the way Ursinus and Calvin occasionally speak of baptism is that they presuppose that this necessary faith exists in the children of believers. Note the language in Ursinus here, after affirming that adults must first believe and make a profession of faith prior to being baptized, Ursinus writes:

This we admit and would add, that to be born in the church, is to infants, the same thing as a profession of faith. Faith is, indeed, necessary to the use of baptism with this distinction. Actual faith is required in adults, and an inclination to faith in infants ... Infants born of believing parents have faith as to inclination.

Webb points out examples of apostates to prove that this infant inclination to faith is not universal. Several of Webb’s examples rest on questionable exegesis (e.g., some commentators have made a case that, despite their typological functions in the NT, we should be open to the *possibility* that Ishmael was saved, in light of Gen. 21, and that Esau repented, in light of Gen. 33, even though both were excluded from the messianic seed line). But even aside from that, he has not considered another possibility, namely, that the men in question did have infant faith, though they later abandoned the covenant. In other words, they were temporary believers, or apostates. In light of the way Psalm 22:9-10 seems to make infant faith normative within the covenant community, this is an interpretive option that should not be lightly dismissed.

Of course, Webb is not open to a genuine apostasy, “that those who were engrafted into Christ really can fall away.” But such a view of apostasy is by no means antithetical to Calvinism or divine sovereignty. See my article “Hebrews 6:4-8: New Life and Apostasy” in *The Federal Vision*, pages 271-299 and Martin Emmrich, “Hebrews 6 –Again!” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003):83-95. Emmrich shows with rather definitive exegesis that the gift of

the Spirit and the blessings of the covenant can in fact be forfeited, in terms of the theology of Hebrews. This is not, however, the same as saying that those who persevere have done so in their own strength (a position Webb labels as “covenant nomism”). Instead, it simply means that not everyone brought into the fellowship of the covenant – or into the blessings listed in Heb. 6:4-5 -- or into the kingdom, house, and temple of God, to use the language of WCF 25.2 – is predestined for final glory. If Webb wants to refute this doctrine of apostasy, he’ll have to actually exegete the passages being used to support to it; not simply proof-text a few passages that speak of perseverance. I agree with him that those predestined for final glory will persevere by the grace of God; where we seem to differ is in the “common operations of the Spirit” ultimate reprobates can experience for a season with the covenant (WCF 10.4).

Webb says “I’ll stick with the old paths” of Southern Presbyterianism. But I ask: Why not walk in the still *older* paths of Calvin, Ursinus, Bucer, and others, who maintained a higher doctrine of sacramental power, and, to my mind at least, gave superior exegesis to the texts in question. Webb appeals to the Southern Presbyterian metaphor for understanding children as “minor citizens in the ecclesiastical commonwealth” (R. L. Dabney; he also cites B. M. Palmer). This illustration is fine as far as it goes; but it doesn’t go far enough. It certainly falls short of the triad given in WCF 25.2 for ecclesiastical membership (kingdom, house, family; obviously, these objective blessings are conferred on infant members of the visible church just as much as adults).

In conclusion, I’m thankful for Webb’s article because, while I think there is some misunderstanding, he’s provided a helpful occasion for clarifying just where the differences may be found and how they might be resolved. It is my hope that the discussion will continue until we reach oneness of mind and heart.

Appendix 1: Theological Terminology – Fixed or Fluid?

One charge brought against me and others is that we have adopted a “novel terminology.” We have departed from the norms and consensus amongst Reformed theologians in the vocabulary we use. For example, Cal Beisner makes this charge in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, pages 306-7. This is certainly a cause for confusion. At the same time, it’s really not that unusual. Nor should it be a problem, in the grand scheme of things. When I subscribed to the Standards, I did not vow to use their language exclusively; I subscribed to a system of doctrine, a system which, in fact, admits of a variety of formulations for different purposes and contexts. I think it would be very difficult as a pastor and teacher to limit myself to the vocabulary of the Westminster Standards, since the Standards use a fairly technical vocabulary that does not match the Bible’s vocabulary in a one-for-one fashion (e.g., as we’ve already seen, “regeneration” in Mt. 19:28, which virtually no commentator would even try to take in the Westminsterian sense; cf. also “new heart” and “new man” terminology in 1 Sam. 10). Nor do the Standards use an identical set of terms to Calvin or the other Reformed confessions (e.g., “regeneration” in Calvin and the Belgic Confession). If I limited myself to Westminster’s terminology, I could quote neither Calvin nor the Bible!

Earlier Reformed theologians understood there would always be a variety in terms and formulas, and so we should show deference to one another and be cautious in assessing one another’s orthodoxy. Far too many theological wars have truly been logomachies. When Bullinger and Jud signed the First Helvetic Confession, they knew they were not subscribing to a timeless system of truth with a fixed set of terms:

We wish in no way to prescribe for all churches through these articles a single rule of faith. For we acknowledge no other rule of faith than Holy Scripture. We agree with whoever agrees with this, although he uses different expressions from our Confession. For we should have regard for the fact itself and for the truth, not for the words. We grant to everyone the freedom to use his own expressions which are suitable for his church and will make use of this freedom ourselves, at the same time defending the true sense of the Confession against distortions.

This “freedom of expression” in Reformed theology is largely missing today, as is the understanding that orthodoxy is not reducible to a particular form of words. God’s truth is so rich and varied and multi-faceted, there are numerous ways to say the truth.

Thinking we have a master dictionary of theological terms can all too easily make us too sure of ourselves. Armed with its trusty definitions, we think we have things pinned down. We think we have the last word on divine truth. But the outcome of this scholastic methodology is inevitable miscommunication with other Christians who have not been enculturated into our precise theological vocabulary, or who have chosen (for whatever reason) to use a different vocabulary. If we're not careful, an overly precise theological lexicon will make it insufferably hard to relate to Christians who do not use the same highly specialized, technical terminology we have chosen to use. Charity demands that we show catholicity in the formulations we tolerate.

In fact a fixed vocabulary, such as we have in the Westminster Standards (especially the Catechisms) can even act as a blinder of sorts when it comes to reading the Bible, since the Bible does not use a technical vocabulary, and, in fact, uses terms in ways quite distinct from the Catechism itself. The Catechism may appear to be a sort of infallible theological dictionary, a “reader’s guide” to Scripture, but such an approach misuses the Catechism and misunderstands the Bible. People long for a timeless creed that will serve as the “final word,” as a creed to end all creeds. But this idolizes a human interpretation of divine revelation.

Anthony Lane helpfully explains the status of theological language:

Do our doctrines partake of the precision of mathematical formulae? If so, there can be no scope for diversity [of expression]. If the result of a sum is 15, all the other answers are simply wrong. This approach would imply an extreme and naïve form of realism foreign to the way in which theology actually works ...

If our theological language is not like mathematical formulae, what is it like? Unlike some today, I want to insist that it is not purely subjective, like some forms of abstract art, but a description of a reality that is out there such that one can meaningfully ask whether or not it adequately describes that reality. But it does not describe it in the same way as, for example, Pythagoras’s theorem, or Boyle’s law.

Lane then explains, following Aquinas, that biblical language is analogical and, following Calvin, an accommodation to our limitations. Then he takes up the non-technical nature of biblical speech.

[T]he Bible almost without exception does not use precise technical terms. Theology as an academic discipline does define its terms, but theologians should not suppose the biblical writers were bound by these precise definitions ...

In light of these observations we should compare our theologies not with mathematical or scientific formulae but with models or maps of reality (*Justification By Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*, 128ff).

That is to say, orthodoxy can be expressed in more than one way. Different terminological systems may in fact be fully compatible at a deeper level. Because all of our theological language can at best approximate the truth, orthodoxy is a circle rather than a pinpoint. In any theological dispute, it is important to show why the differences are more than merely verbal. In other words, one must demonstrate that the differences are a matter of substance, not merely shape or style. It is far too easy for people with different paradigms to talk past one another – until they start yelling “Heretic!” *at* one another. Those engaged in theological debate must have the rare ability to climb outside their own paradigm, and compare it with alternative frameworks.

I am not saying that the differences between Webb and me, to take one example, are merely terminological. I think they are substantial, as I have shown. However, I *am* saying that Webb has not understood my position because he has not understood my vocabulary on its own terms. He’s processed it through his own framework.

It would be nice if we all could agree to a fixed set of terms and definitions, but I’m not sure such a thing is possible. In large part, this is because, as already noted, the Bible itself does not have a fixed set of terms and definitions. Apparently God, who knows far better than we do, did not want us to operate in this way. I’ve already noted some examples of the slippage in terminology between the Bible and the Standards in passing, but let’s take a couple more extended examples just to prove the point.

Suppose Fred is a new Christian. Fred reads his Bible every day now. His pastor gives him a copy of the Westminster Confession. He reads chapter 3 on election and learns that none of the elect can ever be lost. The next day he’s reading in Deuteronomy. And he reads again and again how God chose Israel (e.g., Dt. 7). Fred deduces from that that every member of Israel must have been saved eternally. That’s what the Confession said, right? But then Fred reads about Israelites rebelling and getting judged. Now he has a real problem on his hands. How does he square the Bible with the Confession? He goes to his pastor and asks, “Why were these elect Israelites getting judged? I thought all the elect would persevere to the end.” His pastor has got some real explaining to do. “Well, Fred, not all terms function in a fixed way, so their biblical meaning is identical to their confessional meaning . . .” The pastor will end up sounding a lot like the “Auburn Avenue” men, as he moves back and forth between Deuteronomic and Westminsterian usages.

Or take the precious term “justification.” We all know the Shorter Catechism definition. But should we just read that into the Bible at every occurrence? I hope not, for it would bring heretical consequences. After all, Paul wrote in 1 Tim. 3:16 that Jesus was “justified in the Spirit” but surely Jesus did not need to have his sins forgiven! But, then we should turn around and ask ourselves, “Why has our doctrine of justification left 1 Tim. 3:16 on the cutting room floor?” If we really want to do justice [pun intended] to the Bible’s teaching on justification, perhaps we need to make room for this text *within* our doctrinal formulation instead of leaving it out. We need to expand our doctrinal category to include more of what the Bible itself puts under the rubric “justification.” We also need to admit that justification can function in more ways than the Catechism acknowledges.

These illustrations demonstrate why the charge of “novel terminology” doesn't really hold much weight. There is no inspired lexicon of theological terms for us to adhere to. There's no firmly agreed upon terminology, even in the Reformed confessions. Every theological speaker has to be understood in context. I think those who have raced out to condemn the AAPC/FV advocates have not paid sufficient attention to that context. Time and again, I've seen various deductions drawn from things we've said that have no relation to what we actually meant. And this is almost always due to reading a different meaning into a particular term than the one we put there. We may wish God had dropped a theological lexicon down from heaven, but he hasn't. Perhaps this is because he wants us to learn to love one another and one of the tests of love is sympathetic interpretation (e.g., reading another person on their own terms in the best possible light). Again, this isn't to excuse any sloppiness on my part, or others involved on “my side.” I'm very sorry we haven't communicated our position more clearly at times and again plead for patience, as we work towards coming up with more satisfying formulations. These are difficult issues, and different paradigms, methodologies, emphases, etc. are at work. Charity must prevail if the discussion is to make progress.

Appendix 2: My Previous Qualifications on Baptismal Regeneration

Rick Phillips, like Andy Webb, has been an occasional sparring partner over sacramental issues. Phillips is a fine man, and I'm sure he is an outstanding pastor and preacher. He is gregarious, warm, and friendly. I'm confident he really desires to understand where I'm coming from. Unfortunately, reaching that point has proven to be a long, slow process.

Phillips, like Webb, wants to resist the conclusion that baptism is a converting ordinance. His way of doing this is insisting that the sacraments only grant “sanctifying grace,” appealing to WCF 14.1. To an extent, I have no problem with this: I've said repeatedly that faith is necessary to receive what God offers in baptism; in that sense, baptism doesn't “convert.” At the same time, I think we need to keep a few more details in mind. For one thing, the Word is present not just in preaching, but also in baptism (cf. “in the name of . . .” in WLC 165). No Word, no baptism. Without the Word/promise, all you have is water on the head. The Word is integral to the administration of the sacrament. The sacrament is only a sacrament in conjunction with the Word. Baptism never functions in a vacuum apart from the Word.

Does Phillips' sharp distinction between Word and sacrament really hold up? Not if we believe the Standards are self-consistent. In WSC 88, no distinction is made between which benefits of Christ are communicated via the Word alone and which are communicated via the other outward means. WSC 89 and 91 use the same language to describe what God does in the Word and in the sacraments: both are “effectual means of salvation.” The Catechism does not limit the function of baptism to an “effectual means of sanctification,” and truncating the meaning of the term “salvation” in WSC 91 to something considerably more limited than the same term in WSC 89 would seem to be an illegitimate hermeneutical move. To take the argument a step further, in WSC 92, it seems impossible to limit the “benefits of the new covenant” applied to believers in the sacraments to mere sanctificational grace. Phillips has read a kind of soteriological atomism into the Standards, breaking apart and fragmenting God's unified work of salvation into bits and pieces that can be parceled out piecemeal in the various means of grace. But such an approach simply doesn't work. Word and sacrament always work together. This is God's economy of redemption. (See Anthony Hoekema's

Saved By Grace for a discussion of the importance of the union with Christ motif in keeping the various facets of salvation together.)

Phillips wrote on blog, in May, 2004, "I have had this experience with Rich Lusk's writings on Theologia, where he makes strong unqualified statements about baptism as the means of union with Christ. But just today in an email discussion raging among the FV colloquium members (I think I have received over 300 emails in the last few days in this discussion), Rich told me that he does not believe that baptism conveys grace apart from faith. That was news to me -- welcome news that I gratefully can acknowledge." I do not want to pick on Phillips here, since I consider him a friend. But I do want to use this as an occasion to show how easy it is for us to talk past each other on these sorts of issues, when others aren't using our "buzzwords" or saying things in just the way we're used to. Some times things can be right in front us for a long time before we begin to see them.

I replied to Phillips, "Never, ever have I suggested that someone could be eternally saved by baptism apart from a living faith. My recently stated views are not a new development." His email got to me thinking: had I somehow not made the qualifications on baptismal efficacy clear? So I went back to the first public document on baptism I made available (written in 2001 and found here:

http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/baptismal_efficacy_the_reformed_tradition_past_present_future.htm) and I began to scan back through to see if I had just left out the obvious. I wanted to know: Had I really left my statements unqualified? Had I – subconsciously, perhaps –left myself open to Phillips' charge?

Keep in mind this essay was written over a year before the controversy broke out over AACP teaching (I was on staff at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Austin, TX at the time). Here are some excerpts from that essay, with emphases added:

In context, *none* of these passages [just surveyed] teach baptism *automatically guarantees salvation*.

To illustrate, consider what happens when a baptized person apostatizes (what we might call the "negative" efficacy of baptism). John Murray helpfully distinguished between the intended effect and the actual effect of a sacrament. God's intention in baptism is always blessing. *But an unfaithful response on the part of the recipient will make the actual effect intensified curse.*

Part of the problem is the meaning of the term "regeneration," which has been anything but stable in the development of Reformed theology ...

The problems, then, should be obvious. Not only is there a bifurcation between the way "regeneration" is used in the Bible and dogmatic theology, but dogmaticians themselves have not agreed on the proper theological definition of this key term. So whether or not a given version of "baptismal regeneration" is valid depends largely on which theological vocabulary one has chosen to work with.

If regeneration is taken in the Protestant scholastic sense, "baptismal regeneration" is absurd, since it would mean that each and every person baptized was eternally elect and eternally saved. Obviously, the earlier Reformed theologians who spoke freely of "baptismal regeneration" did not have this kind of monstrosity in mind. Instead, their understanding of regeneration was something less specific, more open ended. Regeneration in this broader, generic (shall we say "covenantal"?) sense can be found in passages like Matthew 13:21-22 and Hebrews 6:7-8.

This, then, is the point: God blesses us in baptism with new life, *though baptism itself does not guarantee perseverance. Thus, we must combine the waters of baptism with enduring faith (cf. 1 Cor.*

10:1-12). If not, the heavenly waters God has poured out upon us will drown us in a flood of judgment.

All this is to show that the debate over "baptismal regeneration" is not what it appears to be at first glance. Indeed, careful definition of terms is needed, lest we simply talk past each other.

This survey [of several Reformed theologians] is by no means comprehensive. Indeed, we have just scratched the surface. It is true that many of the quotations given above are qualified or nuanced in various ways. *These qualifiers are necessary to prevent misunderstanding.*

[Then I add in a footnote:] For example, *none* of the statements quoted above teach that someone is *automatically* saved at baptism *or that each and every person baptized is eternally saved*. Indeed, I know of no theologian in the history of the church who has held such extreme views. Baptism is a true means of grace, but that grace is conditioned both by God's decree and our response of faithfulness. There is no superstitious attribution of magical power to the waters of baptism. *The covenant, in short, is a saving (albeit conditional) relationship.* But we must insist that God's intention in baptism is always to bless, even as he sincerely offers salvation to all who hear the gospel preached. Those who reject the means of grace will only have increased their punishment and have no one to blame but themselves.

Finally, Leithart explains how his re-reformed view of baptism does not lead to presumption, but rather calls us to perseverance ...

[Quoting Leithart:] *Baptism does not guarantee an eternal standing among the people of God*, for the baptized may be removed from the house and cut off from the Table. Yet, baptism is not irrelevant to eternal salvation; though baptism 'by itself' does not guarantee a standing, baptism never is 'by itself' but always a step on a pathway. Perseverance to the end of the pathway, the mark of eschatologically saving faith, is, as Augustine insisted, a gift of grace, which, being grace, is gratuitously distributed as God pleases.

As the WSC teaches, baptism is not a mere picture, but an effectual means of redemption. *This is not to say baptism in isolation guarantees salvation*, but God never intended baptism to stand on its own. Rather, *as we mix the waters of baptism with the obedience of faith and life in the church* among the covenant people, we find that God has already given us and our children every blessing in Christ.

If we may be permitted to return to our earlier discussion of the Westminster Confession on baptism, we should note that *the divines stated not all receive the same degree of grace from baptism: Baptismal grace is conditioned "according to the counsel of God's own will" (WCF 28.6).*

The covenant is conditional, but the demands of the covenant are only met by grace through faith. In the case of baptism, we may say that *receiving blessing* [objectively] is not conditional, but *continuing* in that blessing is. Hence, the continual exhortations in Scripture for the people of God to persevere and live out their baptisms (or, in the language of WLC, to "improve" their baptisms; cf. Rom. 6:1ff).

In WSC 85, three things are required of us for salvation: faith, repentance, and diligent use of the outward means of grace. Note how the catechism's answer squares with Acts 2:14-47: The people *believed* what Peter *preached* to them, *repented* of their sin, and were *baptized*. This package of blessings is coordinated with entrance into the *church* and is called *salvation* (2:47). The catechism, following Acts 2, affirms the means of grace and church membership are ordinarily necessary to receive eternal life, not because these means are efficacious in themselves to produce salvation, but because Christ communicates, or bestows, his redemptive mercy through them. Indeed, it is in the ordained practices of the church (Word, sacrament, prayer) that Christ's promise to be with his people is most directly manifest (cf. Mt. 18:20).

I have to assume Phillips read this paper since it is the one that has gotten

the most feedback and sets the context for my other sacramental writings on the Theologia website. He claims to have studied my material thoroughly. Because he has criticized me repeatedly and publicly, I have to assume that he was at least responsible enough to read this paper.

Now: Have I made unguarded statements? Of course, and I repent. Will I continue to do so? I'm sure I will, unfortunately. But there is also a pretty big context for understanding what those "problem statements" might mean -- and not mean. Not only has Phillips had access to the paper quoted above, he also spent time with me at the Auburn Avenue Colloquium in Ft. Lauderdale. Never once did I even hint at a belief that the sacraments secured eternal glory apart from faith.

I can only conclude that Phillips' gross misrepresentation of me is due to some carelessness or negligence on his part. From long before the so-called Auburn Avenue controversy even began I had qualified my statements about baptism's saving efficacy in terms of both God's decree and our responsibility to exercise persevering faith. I'm even more careful to do so now.

Again, I know a lot of things said above could be said better, but it's frustrating that I could put in so many qualifications, only to have them ignored. It is hard for me to resist the conclusion that most of the paper and ink -- not to mention conference lecture slots -- given over to discussing the "Auburn Avenue Theology" have been wasted. This is so, not because there is nothing here worth discussing -- I think there is -- but because the critics have simply presented poorly informed caricatures, rather than dealing with the substantive issues.

I wonder how much of this sort of thing is going on with the other issues we're discussing besides baptism. I know we're not going to exegete all the passages the same way, agree on the details of (say) Calvin's theology of baptism, infant faith, and so forth. I would love for everyone to reach agreement on those issues. But I, for one, do not think we have to agree on every detail of this stuff to work together in a Reformed denomination in Christ's name or maintain our confessional integrity. We share way too many of the same goals and concerns and beliefs to let these kinds of things get in the way of that. Thankfully, Phillips more recently seems to have acknowledged that my position on the sacraments is not as problematic as he once thought; indeed, he has acknowledged that it is virtually identical to other friends of his whom he considers to be orthodox.

Appendix 3: Baptismal Benefits and the Non-Elect

One sticking point in the controversy over baptism concerns just what the non-elect person receives in the rite. We've already seen that there is *one baptism*, and in that sense, what God offers to the elect person is also offered to the non-elect person. The offer is sincere; the divergence is found in the responses on the part of those baptized (faith vs. unbelief). Again, there is one baptism with two possible responses.

But this shouldn't be taken to mean the unbeliever receives nothing at the font. Objectively, his status is changed. No one, I hope, doubts that he becomes a member of the visible church (WCF 25.2). But we've also seen that that means he becomes a member of the kingdom, house, and family of God. Surely those are tremendous privileges! And, at the last day, the reprobate will be accountable for rejecting these privileges and judged accordingly. To whom much

is given, much will be required!

How can a non-elect person receive these covenantal blessings? Much here is mysterious. However, I'd begin by pointing to two factors. The first is the "common operations" of the Spirit mentioned in WCF 10.4. These "common operations" are not "common grace (indeed, "common grace" did not become a stock phrase in Reformed theology for some time after the Westminster Assembly), but "covenantal grace." In view is not God's indiscriminate grace, given to rank pagans and outsiders to the covenant; rather the Confession is addressing blessings and benefits that both elect and non-elect *covenant members* receive within the communion of the church. A lot of passages address just this concern (Mt. 18:32; Heb. 6:4-8; 2 Pt. 1:9; 2:1; etc.). This forces us to distinguish the kind of temporary forgiveness, enlightenment, and knowledge of the truth that future reprobates can possess, from the irreversible, irrevocable way in which the elect possess these same blessings. In the past, I have suggested distinguishing the two in this way: the non-elect may receive these things covenantally (with conditions implied), the elect receive them decretally (with eternal security implied). I'm not altogether sure that's the best formulation; I intend to keep working on the problem. At any rate, we all must struggle to do justice to both differentiated and undifferentiated grace; that is to say, we must do justice to both sides of WCF10.4: [A] the non-elect never "truly" come to Christ (and "truly" must at the very least include perseveringly to distinguish it from the way in which the non-elect covenant member can come to Christ); and [B] the non-elect covenant member really does experience operations of the Spirit, in common with the elect person, though it might be difficult to stipulate just what all that can include.

Second, I point to John Murray's perceptive statement on page 63 of volume 1 in his *Collected Works*: "Many benefits accrue to the non-elect from the redemptive work of Christ." Now, I know some extreme critics of what is now known as the "Auburn Avenue Theology" have gone so far as to criticize Murray for being unreformed at just this point. But I would beg to differ. Murray, as he did so often with a variety of doctrines, especially towards the end of his career, is not rejecting the Scriptural and Reformed teaching, but providing necessary nuance, grounded in solid exegetical reflection. In this case, Murray is not overthrowing the truth of limited atonement; rather, he's showing the full, biblical scope of Christ's work, which includes "common grace" (given to reprobates outside the covenant) and "covenantal grace" (given in common to all covenant members, including those who will not finally persevere).

The way these things are actually worked out within the framework of God's sovereign decree is a matter for discussion. But it is basically an extra-confessional discussion. Or, perhaps, a nuancing within the parameters of the Confession. After all, there is no chapter in the Westminster Standards devoted to a doctrine of apostasy (or even common grace); the Confession is almost single minded in its focus on the salvation of elect individuals (all of which is fine and true, as far as it goes), so these other matters are only touched upon tangentially. Once we have affirmed the special blessings that only the elect-unto-glory receive (election, regeneration, justification, sanctification, perseverance, etc., in their narrow Westminsterian, *ordo salutis* senses), there is a wide range of views one may take with regard to what blessings reprobate persons may experience in the covenant. I do not think we're suggesting the non-elect receive anything that goes beyond what the confession says about the visible church in WCF 25.2. *Non-elect members of the church/covenant receive blessings commensurate with their temporary membership in "the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God."* The

blood of Christ secures to the non-elect, non-covenant member the blessings of “common grace;” the very fact that a sinner is allowed to live on this earth, breathe God’s air, and enjoy the bounty of creation, is sheer grace, purchased by Christ’s death. That same blood secures to the temporary covenant member “common operations of the Spirit,” that is, certain blessings common to the elect and non-elect within the covenant. And most gloriously, that same blood secures to the elect everlasting salvation and glory. Thus, the blood of Christ is fully efficacious – but in accord with God’s design for humanity, not necessarily in accord with neat and tidy constructions worked out by systematic theologians. In this way, Christ is the Savior of all men, especially them that believe (1 Tim. 4:10). These nuances preserve the core truths of Calvinism (namely the absolute sovereignty of God, especially in salvation, and the efficacy of Christ’s cross in accomplishing all that God intends and designs), but also allow us to read the “hard texts” of the Bible without doing exegetical gymnastics (e.g., 2 Pt. 1:9, 2:1).

Appendix 4: Baptismal Efficacy and the Possibility of Apostasy in the New Covenant

We’ve already said quite a bit about baptism in relation to covenant breaking. But here we want to tie those threads together and offer some brief exegetical reflections. We’ve already noted that baptismal grace is resistible; but how do we square the Bible’s teaching on baptism’s objective efficacy with passages which describe the dangers of falling away?

Baptism effects a change in covenant status. Several familiar illustrations have been used to demonstrate what this means and doesn’t mean. For example, a wedding ceremony effects a change in status for both the man and his bride. They go from two single individuals, to one flesh. Through the ritual they are granted all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities that come with the marital state. And yet a wedding ceremony does not guarantee a happy life together. They have to keep their vows and persevere in love. In the same way baptism does not guarantee the one united (“married”) to Christ will be faithful. He is *really* joined to Christ, with all the attendant blessings and duties, but he still must embrace that new identity in faith and live accordingly. Baptism, like a wedding, is objective in what it effects (e.g., no one ever leaves a wedding ceremony wondering if they bride and groom are really married), but requires subjective fidelity (e.g., people often *do* leave a wedding ceremony wondering if the couple will stay together). Other illustrations could be multiplied to prove the point (e.g., ordination changes a man’s status in the covenant community, conferring certain prerogatives and tasks, but does not mean he won’t become a wolf in sheep’s clothing), but this should be plain enough. Baptism admits one to the covenant; then one has to keep the covenant by faith. Those who do not live by faith are covenant breakers.

Some theologians try to limit apostasy to the Old Covenant. I would suggest they are simply not doing justice to the structure of biblical covenants. The movement from Old to New is not a movement from a breakable to an unbreakable covenant. The basic covenant paradigm and conditions remain the same from age to age. What changes is the magnitude of the blessings (for faithfulness) and curses (for disobedience). In the New Covenant, our salvation is far greater. That’s why the curses are even greater for apostates who violate the New Covenant and trample underfoot the blood of Christ (Heb. 10:26ff). Apostasy is still a danger in the messianic age, albeit one we need not live in constant fear of, providing we are trusting Christ for the gift of perseverance.

The entire book of Hebrews makes it very plain that the structure of the covenant is the same from the old epoch to the new; what has been altered is the intensity and magnitude of the blessings and curses for those who keep or break the covenant. Greater blessings mean greater curses if those blessings are spurned. Of course, the fuller outpouring of the Spirit also yields an expectation of a greater degree of faithfulness in the new age. Nevertheless, it's rather obvious from Hebrews that the New Covenant has not made apostasy an impossibility. No where does the NT say that our salvation is greater because we no longer have to worry about falling away or because perseverance is automatically guaranteed to all covenant members. See, e.g., Heb. 2:1-4, which makes all these points in a very tightly woven warning.

So how does this work out? We see it again and again in the NT Scriptures: Apostasy is still a possibility; hence, the warnings. They are not rhetorical or hypothetical. Some have said they are part of a larger literary motif in which blessings are ascribed to rebels, not really and truly, but reproachfully and ironically. That simply doesn't work, at least not in Hebrews. For example, Hebrews never calls on its readers to introspect to see if they have real faith, or have really come to Christ. It simply calls them to persevere, to continue on as they began. But if some of the readers are being addressed ironically and reproachfully, because they haven't really received any of those blessings, then how could they be called to persevere? They'd be in need of conversion, not perseverance. The ironic reading just doesn't work; it doesn't fit with the pastoral strategy of Hebrews.

2 Peter is also relevant since it deals quite extensively with these issues. Along with Hebrews, it is the "epistle of apostasy." I have not studied 2 Peter extensively, so I can only offer tentative thoughts here. There are 2 major issues to consider: [1] the potential apostasy of the Christian believers Peter addresses as "called and chosen"; and [2] the actual apostasy of the false prophets, described by Peter as having lost various blessings. Let's unpack everything that seems to be going on here.

The content of the terms "called" and "chosen" (1:10) does not match up in this context with the meaning of those terms in standard Reformed theology. Since Peter is addressing the church as a new Israel (see his first epistle especially, but the same theology permeates 2 Pt.), it is at least plausible that terms such as "calling," "election," and "salvation" are functioning for the visible church as they did for old covenant Israel (e.g. Dt. 7). (This might also explain why "calling" precedes "election" in Peter's description.) Israel was called, chosen, saved, etc., and yet still vulnerable to apostasy (cf. e.g., Heb. 3-4, Jude 5, 1 Cor. 10, etc.). The way Peter addresses those he refers to as "called" and "elect" seems to leave open the possibility that they might not make these blessings sure by adding *virute* upon *virute*, resulting in their stumbling to destruction (1:5ff). Peter's logic of election lines up with Paul's in Col. 3:12: election is not so much used as the basis for eternal security, but as the basis of a call to sustained and obedient perseverance in the faith. This also seems to make sense of the "if" clauses in verses 8 and 10 of chapter 1 in 2 Pt., especially when read in conjunction with the warning in verse 9. Verse 11 looks ahead to their final eschatological salvation as something they will enter into in the future *if* they persevere. Hence, Peter gives them reminders, so they will keep pressing on (v. 12). He doesn't suggest that if they stumble, they were never really walking in the first place.

In 2:1, I would suggest the pattern of "redeemed by the Lord, then denying him" is simply an intensified, eschatologized replication of Israel's exodus ("redemption" is an exodus term after all), followed by her rejection of the Lord in the wilderness. I have never been satisfied with the suggestion of some (e.g., John Owen) that the false teachers merely *professed* to have been bought

by the Lord, when in reality they were not. That inserts all kinds of ideas into the text from the outside; there is no hint of that sort of notion in the Greek. Instead, we should rely on wider biblical-theological patterns of thought to guide our exegesis. To wit: Jesus exodused the people (Lk. 9) in his cross; many who were “redeemed” then rejected him. This fits with the recurrent NT theme that Christians from 30-70 AD (and beyond, in several senses) were like that generation of Israelites, in danger of perishing in the wilderness as they trekked on their way to the promised land of the new covenant in its fullness (cf. 2 Pt. 3; 1 Cor. 10; Heb. 3-4). Per John Murray, cited above, this view does not negate the validity of an effective atonement. Those who apostatize received exactly what God wanted them to receive from the cross of Christ.

But more importantly, another way to resolve the “apparent contradiction” between called/chosen and potentially falling away, is to bring in the factor of *time*. There is simply nothing contradictory in saying a person was “cleansed” at time A because he exercised some kind of faith, and then lost (“forgot”) that blessing later when he turned away from God at time B. This gets us into the issue of God's involvement in history, his responsiveness to his creatures' actions, and the way in which he can “treat” future apostates as sons for a season. Calvinists have not always done justice to these matters, but we simply must deal with the reality of God's temporal action.[15] I think this is the best way to read the passage. The rest of 2 Pt. makes the case even more evident.

2 Pt. 2:20 is really a summary of what happens to those who apostatize. While each phrase could be unpacked, the key is “the latter end is worse for them than the beginning.” Peter sees apostasy as a three chapter story, with a “beginning,” a middle, and a “latter end.” Every apostate passes through these phases. In the middle phase he *really* experiences all the blessings ascribed to him throughout this passage: called, redeemed, escaped, knowledge of Jesus, etc. In the latter phase, he *really* loses these blessings. If the blessings were just attributed to him in an ironic way, nothing would have been lost. The last state would not be worse than the first; it would be identical to the first. The grounds for harsher judgment would be removed since no grace was really received and then spurned. For more scholastic Calvinists, the dynamics of the “story” of apostasy that Peter tells are lost; apostasy becomes much more static and less narrativel. (Note that Jude 12 makes the same point. Apostates are “twice dead.” But this means three phases: spiritually dead, alive, dead again.)

2 Pt. 2:4 is also telling, since the fall of the angels is given as a warning to those in the church who might apostatize. I am not at all certain of Peter's meaning here, but for the sake of the argument, assume that he has in view angelic beings.[16] Surely no one doubts the *real* blessedness of the angels prior to their apostasy. Calvin's French Reformed Confession (chapter 7) even indicates that the unfallen angels stood faithfully *by grace* – which means fallen angels have fallen from grace! But Peter seems to be using the paradigm of angelic apostasy as a model for human apostasy, for the “falling away” of the false teachers. In other words, the angels were “cast down” from a high position; the same happens to those humans who apostatize from covenant grace. In neither case are blessings being ascribed solely in an ironic, mocking, sarcastic kind of way. That just doesn't fit the way the passage actually functions. The warnings do not make sense if they are read as saying, “If you apostatize, you never had all the blessings you thought you had.”

Again, I offer this tentatively since I still haven't studied 2 Pt. in great

detail. But it makes sense to me, better sense than other readings which make the blessings only apparent, or only a matter of rhetoric. To be sure, I do see a “rhetoric of reproach” in the Bible; I just think it's misapplied here. And I do think that both perseverance for the individually elect as well the apostasy of some covenant members are undergirded by the sovereign plan of God. The blessings ascribed to apostates in 2 Pt. would fall under those “common operations” that may belong to all members of “the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ and the house and family of God.”

To return to our earlier point, the WCF itself acknowledges “undifferentiated blessings” in WCF 10.4. There are “common operations of the Spirit.” That is, there are blessings of the Spirit that are undifferentiated because they are common to all covenant members, both those who will persevere and those who won't. Of course, 10.4 then goes on to make a differentiation: those who don't persevere “never truly come unto Christ” because coming “truly” includes coming “perseveringly.” In this way our confession does justice both to passages which describe undifferentiated grace (e.g., Heb. 6, 2 Pt. 1-2), as well as differentiated grace (Jn. 6). If the story of an apostate is read from front to back, he shares for a season undifferentiated blessings with those who persevere. But if his story is read from back to front, we can say there was differentiation all along the way. Of course, God engages both perspectives because he is both the transcendent Lord over history, having planned and decreed all things, and immanently involved within history, as a responsive agent.

[1] Andy has made his paper available to his email discussion group, the Warfield List. The archives are public. His essay is available at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bbwarfield/message/17337>. The paper was originally going to be an address, but Andy did not get to give it.

[2] I have various essays on the sacraments available at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/cat_sacraments.htm. Webb deals with others besides me, and I will not pretend to be a representative of anyone else. Because Webb (briefly) singles out my teaching, I will compare his criticisms with what I have actually taught. Hopefully this is an opportunity to move the debate forward.

[3] That isn't to say the “new creation” is limited to the church, of course. The center of this new creation is the church; the ekklesia may be regarded as the visible form of the new creation in the world. But like the “kingdom of God” theme in Scripture, the “new creation”/“regeneration” theme is not confined to the church as an institution, but it is rooted in that institution.

[4] In Mt. 19:28, Jesus speaks of the regeneration. This is interesting since the term “regeneration” was best known from Stoic philosophy, which taught eternally recurring cycles of regeneration in repeated world conflagrations. Jesus speaks of a definite, singular regeneration event. In other words, he has a linear view of time/history, and sees “the regeneration” as the climax of everything.

[5] See my discussion in the essay “Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition: Past, Present, and Future,” available at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/baptismal_efficacy_the_reformed_tradition_past_present_future.htm.

[6] A more complete, nuanced discussion of “regeneration” language in church history may be found in Ray Sutton's book *Signed, Sealed, and Delivered*.

[7] The WCF simply offers a tautology: elect infants dying in infancy will be saved (10.3). But anyone dying at any age will be saved if they're elect. In terms of Westminster's definition, the elect just are those God has chosen for salvation (3.4).

[8] This was the view of Canons of Dort: "Since we must make judgments about God's will from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy."

[9] He probably has popularized distortions of Roman Catholic teaching in view.

[10] Both men believed in the objective efficacy of baptism, and stated that faith was necessary to receive what God offers in the sacrament. Both held to the completeness of baptism, and the enduring power of baptism, making penance unnecessary as a remedy for post-baptismal sin. Unlike the doctrine of the real presence in the Lord's Supper, baptismal efficacy was never a matter of polemics between Luther and Calvin. Calvin emphasized election more than Luther did, whereas Luther emphasized more what every baptized person receives, not just the elect. Also, Calvin emphasized the conditionality and obligation of baptism more than Luther did, largely because he more fully developed a theology of the covenant. But in the end, these differences generally amount to matters of pastoral style and emphasis, not theological substance.

[11] Mounds of additional evidence could be marshaled for what I've sketched out here. See, e.g., Joel Garver's essay, "The Early Scots Reformed on Baptism," available at <http://www.lasalle.edu/~garver/scotbapt.htm>.

[12] See my biblical-theological essay, "Jesus' Baptism: Fount of Life" available at

http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/jesus_baptism_the_fount_of_life.htm.

[13] Rayburn has worked out this principle more consistently than Hodge in that he holds to covenant communion (or paedocommunion).

[14] For a brief overview of "covenant nurture," see my essay, "Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy: Historic Trends and Current Controversies," in *The Federal Vision*, edited by Duane Garner and Steve Wilkins, 107-113.

[15] See my Feb. 2, 2004 PM sermon at AAPC on Jonah 3, "Does God Change His Mind? A Complex Providence?" for a more detailed discussion.

[16] The angels could also be human prophets or messengers. It is difficult to decide the meaning of 2 Pt. 2:4 apart from deciding if the "sons of God" in Gen. 6:1-4 are godly (human) Sethites or fallen spirit beings. See also Jude 6.