
BAPTISMAL EFFICACY AND BAPTISMAL LATENCY: A SACRAMENTAL DIALOGUE

Rich Lusk

While I have a deep appreciation for the overall scholarship of Dr. William B. Evans, his recent article critiquing my theology of baptism misses the mark in some important ways.¹ As I read through Evans's essay, I continually found myself nodding in agreement, even making mental notes of places where I had argued the precise same point in my writings, often even using the same quotations from John Calvin to clinch the argument. Thus, I was quite dismayed to find that when Evans's turned to analyze my position, he portrayed me as being almost totally out of synch with his own views. Indeed, Evans implies that I am an Arminian, possibly on the road to Rome (87)!

Whatever our differences, in the grand scheme of things, Evans and I have some important commonalities. We share a desire to "get Calvin right," that is, to do justice to the Reformer's deep and rich sacramental theology. We both believe in an efficacious baptism (despite some differences in how we understand that efficacy). We both reject Zwinglianism, with its reduction of the sacraments to empty symbols. We both desire to continually point believers back to their baptisms as a way of assuring them that Christ is their Savior. We share a common goal of attributing neither too little nor too much to the sacraments. We agree on a two-sided "promise and threat" view of the covenant. Most importantly, we both insist on the absolute sovereignty of God's grace in salvation and the necessity of a human response of faith.

This is not to say our differences are insignificant, though I do not believe they rise to the magnitude that Evans suggests. Our differences are worthy of charitable dialogue, but I am convinced both of our respective positions are well within the boundaries of historic Reformed theology. I am very grateful to *Presbyterion* for the opportunity to enter into dialogue with Evans in a public format. My aim is to clarify issues of both agreement and disagreement, without engaging in unnecessary

¹ William B. Evans, "Really Exhibited and Conferred...in His Appointed Time': The New Reformed Sacramentalism," *Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review* 31/2 (Fall 2005), 72-88. Parenthetical page numbers in the text refer to this article.

polemics. Rather, I hope that as my iron clashes with Evans's iron, I can be of benefit to him even as he has already been of benefit to me. My overarching desire is to heal rather than intensify divisions that (sadly) exist within the Reformed world.

Due to the nature of Evans's article, as well as the nature of the current Reformed controversy, it will be tedious but necessary for me to continually cite from both Evans's essay as well as quote from my earlier work on baptism. Dialogical essays are not easy to write (or read, for that matter), but in this case, the situation demands such an approach. Throughout I am only speaking for myself, though I realize unavoidably that others who have been (fairly or not) branded with the "Federal Vision" label² will be associated with my answers. Interested readers should pursue what these other men have to say in their own words. Readers are also encouraged to consult my web articles on baptism for a fuller analysis of the issues under discussion.³

1. Do I affirm Calvin's offer/response model of sacramental efficacy?

Evans claims that with respect to the efficacy of baptism, I have rejected the "carefully balanced dialectic of objective offering and subjective

² For my recent thoughts on the often misunderstood "Federal Vision" controversy, see my "Response to Bryan Chapell," available at <http://trinity-pres.net/essays/chapell-response.php>.

³ Evans appears to only interact with two essays of mine, both found in the book *The Federal Vision*, edited by Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe, La.: Athanasius Press, 2004). My essays are "Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy: Historic Trends and Current Controversies" (71-126) and "New Life and Apostasy: Hebrews 6:4-8 as a Test Case" (271-299). However, because Evans's essay purports to deal with an entire "movement," and because of the wide ranging nature of his criticisms, I have included quotations from several of my other writings, all of which were publicly available before he wrote. Three key essays are online at <http://www.hornes.org/theologia/>: "Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition: Past, Present, and Future"; "Calvin on Baptism, Penance, and Absolution"; and "Rome Won't Have Me." Also of importance to this discussion is my "Do I Believe in Baptismal Regeneration?" available at <http://www.auburnavenue.org/positionpapers.htm>. Many of the issues Evans raises are dealt with more thoroughly in these essays. Part of what I hope to demonstrate is that Evans's paper is severely under-researched. Many of his criticisms have already been answered in my work and that of others who have been lumped into the so-called "Federal Vision" group. In short, very little in Evans's paper suggests that he is familiar enough with the issues surrounding the "Federal Vision" to write a trustworthy critique. The vast majority of "Federal Vision" discussion has taken place online, so web research is essential to any analysis of it.

reception [found in Calvin and Westminster]...in favor of something else" (74). But is this the case?

In reality, my public position all along has been identical to Calvin's. In baptism, God offers, and we receive; God promises, and we believe; God acts, and we respond. God wraps up the gift of Christ in the means of grace; we receive and open the gift by faith. There is, as Calvin says, "a mutual relation between faith and the sacraments." This is the structure Calvin insisted upon, as Evans shows in quoting him (80): "we obtain only as much [from baptism] as we receive in faith."

This issue is the clearest point of agreement between Evans's and me, as a survey of my writings on baptism reveals. In "Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy," on pages 103-106, I develop an analogy between baptism and preaching to draw out the necessity of a faith-response to God's free offer in baptism. My essay, "Do I Believe in Baptismal Regeneration?" includes the following sampling:

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...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...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...

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 [WCF 25.2]. But that blessing devolves into curse if there is no subjective appropriation of Christ by faith.

My earliest web published article, "Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition," written in 2001, includes this qualifier:

For example, none of the statements [quoted from the Reformers in the essay]...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...

In my more recent reply to Bryan Chapell, I wrote:

The sacraments offer Christ to faith because God has appointed them to this end and uses them in this fashion. No magic here -- just Christ and the Spirit working in accordance with the promises of the Word (WSC 91). Faith receives what God offers in the means of grace. There is much mystery involved, but this need not be as complicated as it's been made out to be...Calvin taught that faith should seek assurance in the sign: "While I so often inculcate that grace is offered by the sacraments, do I not invite them there to seek the seal of their salvation?"

This may be overkill, but in reality this catalog of quotations is only a smattering of those I could offer to prove the point. Hopefully it is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that Evans's claims that I do not balance the objective and subjective are unfounded. I believe baptism is an objective offer of Christ and his benefits, to be received by faith.

2. Is baptismal efficacy ultimately controlled by divine sovereignty?

Once, again, I find myself in full agreement with Evans, despite his attempts to put me in a different camp. Evans suggests that my baptismal position departs from Calvinistic soteriology and moves towards Arminianism (87). This is an odd criticism, because at other points, he criticizes me for being too reliant on Augustine in my baptismal theology (75, 77). It seems strange that I could be heading in both Augustinian and semi-Pelagian directions simultaneously, since Augustine and Pelagius were mortal theological foes.

In reality, my work makes no sense unless thoroughly grounded in a commitment to God's sovereignty in salvation. In the essay, "New Life and Apostasy," I demonstrate repeatedly my desire to reconcile Hebrews 6:4-8 to the five points of Calvinism, proving that "the TULIP must stand unchallenged" (275). I affirm in classical Calvinist language that "the sovereign plan of God undergirds both perseverance and apostasy.

Those who are saved will revel in the grace and mercy of God for all eternity. No merit or self-contribution is involved in their salvation. Those who are lost will only have themselves to blame for their failure to persevere" (278). My summary of the essay includes this paragraph:

God, in eternity past, elected in Christ a great multitude to salvation. This election was wholly gracious and unconditional, having its source only in the free mercy and good pleasure of God. Those the Father elected to eternal salvation, he sent his Son to die for. His atoning work is fully sufficient for their salvation and completely accomplished their redemption. The Holy Spirit works in these same chosen ones to apply Christ's saving work to them and keep them faithful to Christ their whole lives. Because of the hardness of their hearts in sin, this work of grace must be, ultimately, irresistible. No elect person can be lost and no non-elect person can attain salvation.

Obviously, this is not something that Pelagius or even Jacobus Arminius could have written. In another place ("Do I Believe in Baptismal Regeneration?"), I have commented on the WCF in this way:

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...⁴

In light of this data, it is hard for me to understand why Evans would suggest I am moving towards the false dichotomy of John Nevin, who forced a choice between the eternal decrees and efficacious sacraments (87). These are precisely the things my system holds together. While Nevin has much to offer contemporary evangelicals, as Daryl Hart's recent biography shows,⁵ absolutely nothing I have ever written indicates I am following Nevin into error at this point. I have

⁴ The point of confusion between Evans and me is probably in our differing conceptions of the *manner* in which God's sovereignty conditions sacramental efficacy – specifically if the distinction is in the realm of the objective or subjective. For Evans, the elect and non-elect receive *different* baptisms; only the baptisms of the elect are efficacious in any sense. For me, the elect and non-elect receive the *same* baptism, but God causes the elect person to *respond* differently. More on this below.

⁵ D. G. Hart, *John Williamson Nevin: High Church Calvinist* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2005).

been, and remain, a committed Calvinist – which point should be evident to anyone who gives my work a fair reading. Evans and I agree on the compatibility of affirming *both* God’s sovereignty in salvation *and* God’s use of external means in applying salvation.

3. Is baptism’s efficacy “mechanical” or “relational”?

Evans claims that I have embraced a mechanical, medieval view of baptismal efficacy, over against the personal, relational view of Calvin. Again, Evans fails to demonstrate his criticisms from what I have actually written. Indeed, Evans’s charge betrays a certain degree of misunderstanding about the current “Federal Vision” controversy. The entire “Federal Vision” project (insofar as there is such thing) is firmly based on a relational, Trinitarian metaphysics – a point which has not set well with many critics, who remain locked in the grip of medieval and/or modernist categories.⁶

Consider how I unpack what “baptismal regeneration” language might mean, if rehabilitated in terms of Reformed biblical theology. My distance from a mechanical *ex opere operato* view should be clear:

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...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...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...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”...⁷

⁶ See, e.g., Rick Phillips, “Covenant Confusion,” available at http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086|CHID559376|CIID1787572,00.html.

⁷ From “Do I Believe in Baptismal Regeneration?” See also Peter Leithart, “Trinitarian Anthropology: Towards a Trinitarian Re-casting of Reformed Theology” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: John Knox Theological Seminary), ed. E. Calvin Beisner, 58-71. Leithart’s dissertation *The Priesthood of the Plebs* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), develops a relational, narrational account of baptismal efficacy that has become standard fare in “Federal Vision” circles. Leithart’s *Against Christianity* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), is something of a “Federal Vision”

Whatever this is, it is *not* a “mechanical” or “impersonal” view of baptismal efficacy. Evans’s criticisms, however well intentioned, are poorly informed. I am in virtually complete agreement with Evans’s overview of Calvin’s baptismal theology, over and against the medieval view, on pages 77-80 of his essay.

Evans repeatedly asserts that those who believe that baptism is ordinarily efficacious at the time of administration must inevitably believe in a mechanical view of the sacrament (e.g., 83, 85). But this is an assertion he has not proved. Is a wedding ceremony somehow impersonal or mechanical simply because the rite always effects a change in the status of the parties involved at the time of administration? Is an ordination ritual somehow mechanistic because it always changes the status of the man who has hands laid upon him at that very time? Surely not. Evans is begging a very important question with his presupposition. This is an area that needs further discussion.

4. Is baptism’s efficacy latent with regard to covenant children?

Evans and I appear to differ over the status of the baptized child. Evans provides evidence that Calvin believed baptism was latent in the case of covenant infants. In other words, baptized infants do not experience the blessings of baptism until they grow considerably older and are converted. Once they come of age, and manifest faith and repentance, they can begin to receive the fruits of baptism. Evans cites Calvin’s conversion experience as proof (81).

Evans is right to insist on the necessity of faith if the saving benefits of baptism are to be received. But the problem, as I see it, is that Evans treats paedobaptisms as though they were *ordinarily* baptisms of unbelievers. Or to put it another way, Evans denies that faith can be present where faith is not maturely professed or articulated.⁸

This view cashes itself out in the way that Evans makes baptismal latency *normative* for covenant children. Thus, while Evans is not exactly sure *when* God ordinarily adopts a covenant child into his heavenly family, he is certain that it is *not* at baptism. Nor can it be *before* baptism.

manifesto. Chapter 3 deals with rituals and sacraments. See also Ralph Smith, *Trinity and Reality: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2004). For a summary of these views, as related to baptism, see the section “Current State of the Question and the Way Forward” in my essay “Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition.”

⁸ This is a huge topic, much larger than I can deal with here. This question, and several others under discussion in my dialogue with Evans, are dealt with at length in my book *Paedofaith: A Primer on the Mystery of Infant Salvation and a Handbook for Covenant Parents* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2005).

It must happen later. But I would suggest this misses the thrust of a lot of classical Reformed teaching on baptism.

I do not think Calvin's personal experience of being baptized as an infant and then coming to faith in later years can be regarded as normative for evangelical church practice. After all, Calvin was baptized in a context of apostate Romanism, in which the community was devoid of true faith. Such a situation should hardly govern the way we view baptized children in believing covenant communities. It is not surprising Calvin had some kind of "conversion experience" when he turned to the Reformed faith. But such conversion experiences are hardly the *traditional* expectation for covenant children in Reformed theology.

Calvin's theology of covenant children is more complex than Evans indicates. While Calvin does speak of children exercising faith in a mature fashion when they reach years of intellectual maturity, Evans downplays Calvin's admission of infant faith. While acknowledging Calvin's "seed faith" doctrine (83), Evans gives it very little weight in his exposition of baptismal efficacy.⁹

⁹ Following R. S. Wallace, Evans suggests that by "seed faith," Calvin simply means "the grace of the Holy Spirit which will be effectual at God's appointed time" (83). But this is not exactly what Calvin actually says. He writes, "the seed of both [faith and repentance] lies within them [that is, baptized infants] *by* the secret working of the Spirit" (*Institutes* 4.16.20, emphasis added). Seed faith is *not* the Spirit himself, but the *fruit* of his work, just as in adults. It is not mere potentiality, but a nascent, trusting relationship with the Lord. "Seed faith" differs from mature faith in that it is not engendered by a preaching ministry and does not include intellectual knowledge (4.16.19, 31), but it is a form of faith none the less.

To be sure, Calvin acknowledges that if an unbeliever is inadvertently baptized, his baptism is "latent" and can be made effective at a later time (e.g., his commentary on Acts 8:13). But Calvin does *not* go so far as to assert that infant baptisms are *normatively* latent. In fact, his best example of a latent baptism is that of an adult – Simon Magus! However, even when baptisms are latent, the latency is not due to some lack in baptism itself, for the sign and thing signified are always joined. Rather, the problem is the unbelieving reception of baptism.

There are complex ambiguities involved in Calvin's doctrine of infant faith, and it is likely that he did not hold a static view throughout his career. But on the whole, Calvin seems quite favorable to a doctrine of infant faith, even if he gives it less prominence than Martin Luther. For example, he sees John the Baptist's infant regeneration as "proof" of the Lord's willingness to extend grace to the youngest children and rejects the view that our children must remain "in Adam" until they are older (*Institutes* 4.16.17). Even though faith is not externally traceable in infants as in adults, Calvin admits that the Spirit can and does work in them, so they may receive the fruit of baptism even before reaching

But this is a mistake. For Calvin, baptized infants receive even in infancy “some part of that grace, of which they are to have the full measure shortly after” (*Institutes* 4.16.19). This grace is defined as a ratified covenantal relationship (4.16.21). In other words, while Calvin fully expected the covenant child to grow up into the grace of his baptism (that is, to “improve” his baptism, in the language of the WLC), the benefits of baptism are already present even in infancy. Calvin does not teach that baptism’s efficacy is latent, so much as he argues that what God gives the child at the time of baptism is adapted to the child’s state of immaturity.¹⁰ A believing infant receives grace and blessing as much

maturity (4.16.21). He insists, “It were dangerous to deny that Lord is able to furnish them [that is, infants] with knowledge of Himself in any way He pleases” (4.16.18), even apart from preaching (4.16.19). Calvin says it would be a sacrifice to baptize unbelievers (e.g., commentary on Acts 8:37), and insists that even *before* baptism our children belong to the church and participate in salvation.

To be fair, these statements must be balanced by other places where Calvin admits that infant faith is not *absolutely* universal in covenant infants (as his own testimony proves) and where he insists that the baptized child needs to grow up into the full exercise of faith. But these elements in his teaching do not overthrow the likelihood of paedofaith in covenant children (e.g., *Institutes* 4.16.17, 20). Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 133ff, provides a helpful overall assessment of the classic Reformed view:

[T]he Holy Spirit is at work with children of believers from the very beginning of life. Christ begins His work of redemption in their hearts even before they have the power of reason...The Reformers were quite willing to admit the existence of faith in children before the development of understanding...The simple childlike trust which children have before the age of reason is precisely the kind of faith which Jesus held up as exemplary to His disciples...Before children are able to make a reasonable judgment or even a conscious decision, they can have faith as a gift from God. This faith is a trusting and loving inclination toward God. Faith is something deeper than either the reason or the will. It is something which, by the grace of God, the Spirit plants within us. Both obedience and understanding proceed from it.

¹⁰ If anything, it seems Evans should speak of latent *faith* in covenant children, not latent *baptisms*. If anything, it is *faith*, not *baptism*, that exists in seed form in the life of the infant. Baptism is complete; it is faith that must grow. In making baptism latent, rather than faith, Evans risks making baptismal efficacy a human, rather than divine, work, contra Calvin and WSC 91. In truth, faith does not *make* baptism actual or effective; rather, it *receives* what God effectively offers and works in baptism. The benefits of baptism are received according to the measure of “seed faith” in infancy; they are received more fully as faith grows towards maturity.

But “seed faith” is all that is necessary in the time of infancy. If even a mustard seed of faith is sufficient to move mountains (Mt. 17:20), *why shouldn’t*

as he is capable at the time of his baptism. He will grow into a fuller reception of baptismal blessings throughout the course of his life. The efficacy of baptism is dynamic, personal, and perpetual.

Calvin's catechetical materials, designed for use in authentically Reformed congregations and families, bear this out. In these documents, Calvin insists that the baptized child receives great benefit from his baptism at the time of administration (and beyond). The event of baptism is so significant in the life of the child that it determines his whole personal identity from that time forward. There is no expectation of a decisive conversion experience later on; instead, the child is continually directed back to his baptism as the time at which he received forgiveness and new life. Thus, in his *Instruction for Young Children in Christian Doctrine* he writes:

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...

Teacher: What is this baptism?

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

In other words, baptized children are to be regarded (and to regard themselves) as Christians, as regenerate, and as cleansed, from the time of baptism onwards. There is no hint of baptismal latency, even if the child will grow into fuller *subjective appreciation* of what his baptism in infancy accomplished for him.

There are other places where Calvin speaks about baptism in a way that makes Evans's latency view dubious. For example, in *Institutes* 4.15.3, he writes (emphasis mine),

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.

In his *Antidote* to the Council of Trent, he says that regeneration commences at baptism. The time referent is unmistakable:

"seed faith" in infants be adequate to join them to Christ unto salvation? Evans's view creates an insuperable problem: *How much faith does one have to have in order for baptism to become effective? How much must the seed of faith germinate before the child crosses over into a state of salvation? How much faith is necessary to trigger the potentiality of baptism?* The basic difference between the view of Calvin ("seed faith") and Evans ("seed baptism") is nothing less than the salvation of the child in the interim period between infancy and the age at which the child can make a mature profession of faith. Obviously, this is no small matter.

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.

If this new life (Calvin's version of "regeneration") goes on making progress through the whole course of life, that must include infancy. Calvin did not say that baptism's efficacy would kick in during the toddler years, or the teenage years; rather he expected new life to ordinarily *begin* at the time of baptism in infancy and *continue* growing through the whole duration of one's life as one grew in faith.¹¹

In his "Form for Administering Baptism at Geneva," he wrote, "All these graces are bestowed upon us *when* he is pleased to incorporate us into his Church by baptism; for in this sacrament he attests the remission of sins" (emphasis added). This is the classic Reformed view.¹²

¹¹ Even in contexts where Calvin does explicitly admit that covenant children must grow up to acknowledge the full benefits of their baptisms, he insists that the "force...and substance of baptism are common to children" (*Geneva Catechism*). For Calvin, as for the other Reformers, baptism is the *beginning* of a specifically *Christian* form of life. Baptized children are *actually*, not just *potentially*, Christians.

¹² Calvin's close associate Martin Bucer also said many things about the efficacy of paedobaptism that are hard to square with a doctrine of latency. For example, he wrote in his *Brief Summary of Christian Doctrine*, that baptism,

[W]hen 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 ...

In Bucer's baptismal liturgy, the post-baptismal prayer does not ask for future reception of blessings that still lie dormant, but rather thanks God for having already begun the work of regeneration in baptism and for already making the child an heir of salvation. Note the verb tenses:

Almighty God, heavenly Father, we give you eternal praise and thanks, that you have granted and bestowed upon this child your fellowship, that you have born him again to yourself through holy baptism, that he has been incorporated into your beloved son, our only savior, and is now your child and heir...

Perhaps the biggest problem with Evans's interpretation of Calvin is that Calvin's contends many times over for a view that is the mirror *opposite* of baptismal latency – namely, he argues that covenant children *already* possess salvation from conception, and ought to be baptized on that basis!

The offspring of believers are born holy, because their children, while yet in the womb, before they breathe the vital air, have been adopted into the covenant of eternal life. Nor are they brought into the church by baptism on any other ground than because they belonged to the body of the Church before they were born. He who admits aliens to baptism profanes it.... For how can it be lawful to confer the badge of Christ on aliens from Christ. Baptism must, therefore, be preceded by the gift of adoption, which is not the cause of half salvation merely, but gives salvation entire; and this salvation is afterwards ratified by Baptism.¹³

If any account of this is made, it will be evident that baptism is properly administered to infants as something owed to them. For in early times the Lord did not deign to have them circumcised without making them participants in those things which were signified by circumcision. Otherwise he would have mocked his people... (*Institutes* 4.16.5)

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. (*Institutes* 4.15.20)

Now, since God does cut off from childhood the hope of mercy, but rather makes it sure, why should we take away the sign, much inferior to the thing itself?... [I]nfants receive forgiveness of sins; therefore they must not be deprived of the sign. (*Institutes* 4.16.22)

Evans's commitment to baptismal latency inescapably tends in a Baptist direction. Why would God command us to baptize babies if they cannot respond in any appropriate way at that time? Why not "wait and see," as the Baptists do? Why offer them something many years before they can actually receive it rightly? Further, on a latency view, what does a baptized child have that an unbaptized child in a Baptist church does not have? An appeal to the covenant promises (e.g., Gen. 17) is not

¹³ Quoted in Robert Rayburn, "The Presbyterian Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture and Covenant Succession," available at <http://www.faithtacoma.org/covenant2.htm#7>. If covenant children already possess salvation entire before baptism, it is hardly possible to say that their baptisms are latent for years afterwards.

a sufficient answer for Evans in this case, because in his view the covenant promise cannot actually have *effect* until the child has matured. In other words, in Evans's view, the promise is *not* actually for infants (unless they happen to die in infancy – in which case, a special exception is made, though Evans does not explain why or how this could be so). Rather, the promise is effective only for children who are old enough to make a mature profession of faith (though Evans does not specify an age). Until they have an adult-like faith, the covenant promises are theirs only potentially, by way of future hope and anticipation, but not in actuality. Inevitably, in this scheme, a subjective conversion experience will always overshadow one's objective covenant standing based on baptism.¹⁴

Evans asserts that latent baptisms can still support a covenantal nurture approach to parenting (83).¹⁵ But this seems very tenuous and inconsistent, at best. If baptism is an effectual means of salvation (WSC 91), and baptized children do not yet have the effect of baptism, it follows that they do not yet possess salvation. In Evans's view, our young children are not yet united to Christ. They do not have new life. They are still under the power of sin and Satan, in need of conversion out of unbelief. Unless they die in infancy, they are in a state of damnation. Blessings have been *offered* to them in baptism, but will not and cannot become their *actual possession* until they get older and convert. How then are we supposed to nurture them in their early years? On what basis can we teach them that Jesus loves them or that God is their Father? How can we expect them to uphold Christian standards of conduct "in the Lord" (Eph. 6:2-4)?¹⁶ I am glad that Evans

¹⁴ To spell this out further: to the extent that Evans insists that paedobaptisms are latent, to the same extent he deprives our children of salvation (for salvation is the *effect* of the sacrament – WSC 91). It is one thing to say that Simon Magus received a "latent" baptism because of his unbelief; it is entirely another matter to say that our children receive baptism in the same fashion. This is simply not Calvin's view of covenant children. If Evans's doctrine of latency only means that our children come to a later subjective realization and deeper appropriation of what God gave them in baptism, there is no real problem (cf. Calvin's *Institutes* 4.16.21). But his view of latency seems designed to defer the saving effect of the sacrament entirely, until the child is old enough to have some sort of conversion experience, including an intellectual grasp of the faith.

¹⁵ On covenant nurture, see my "Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy," 109-113 and *Paedofaith*, chapters 7-8. I should add that I appreciate much from Evans's article, "A Tale of Two Pieties: Nurture and Conversion in American Christianity," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 13/3 (Summer 2004), 61-75.

¹⁶ These questions are not a caricature. Evans's view of latent efficacy depends upon a *denial* of faith in our baptized children during their early years.

wants these things for covenant children (as best I can tell), even if only in a “blessedly inconsistent” way. But his inconsistencies are unfortunate. It seems to me he has not come to full grips with the implications of his “latent efficacy” position.¹⁷

If they do not have faith, they are not in a state of salvation. If they had faith, they would have already received the efficacious fruit of baptism.

¹⁷ We have not even touched on the *biblical* arguments against latency. Does Evans expect us to believe that the covenant sign of circumcision was latent? That Jewish parents refused to regard their children as possessing, in principle, the blessings of the covenant, until they were much older? Plus, there is a great deal of biblical data pointing to the *normativity* of faith in covenant infants, so that we may regard our children as already receiving and possessing what was offered to them in the sacrament of initiation. Evans’s case for latency rests on the dubious claim that covenant infants do not ordinarily have faith. But the Psalter would suggest other wise (Ps. 22:9-10; 71:5-6). These texts were part of Israel’s public liturgy/hymnal, and thus had to be considered paradigmatic for covenant children. Other biblical texts seem to tie the efficacy of baptism to the time of its administration, apart from exceptional circumstances (e.g., Acts 22:16; Rom. 6:1-6; Tit. 3:5). None of these texts give even the slightest hint that the proffered blessings (forgiveness, union with Christ, and regeneration) are received at some time other than the event of baptism itself. There is not a single biblical text that teaches or even implies that baptism’s efficacy is *normatively* latent. Nor is there a passage that teaches we should *hope* that some day our baptized children will convert and become Christians, as opposed to treating them as Christians *already* from baptism onwards. It is very tenuous to baptize our children on the basis of the covenant promise, and then immediately afterwards insist that that promise does not actually belong to them for many years to come.

Evans’s final paragraph in his essay actually contradicts the main thrust of his paper. Throughout his essay, he claims that baptism is latent until a child grows up and has a conversion experience. If we take latency seriously, it means that covenant children do not yet possess any of the blessings signified in baptism until they come to faith, which triggers the efficacy of baptism and makes the blessings actually theirs. Everything is a matter of potential until conversion, so that conversion, rather than baptism, becomes the really critical event. However, in his final paragraph, Evans claims that the child’s baptismal incorporation into Christ is more important than his conversion (88). But how can *latent* union with Christ at the time of baptism be more important than *actual* union with Christ at the time of conversion? Evans is trying to synthesize revivalism’s insistence on a conversion experience with the covenant nurture paradigm of classical Calvinism, but they simply do not mix.

Finally, Evans’s view of latency destroys the OT’s rich web of typological precursors to baptism. All the typological forerunners to new covenant baptism – including the flood, the Red Sea crossing, the Levitical washings, kingly anointings, and priestly ordinations – had a kind of efficacy that was ordinarily

5. What do the Westminster Standards teach with regard to the timing of baptism's efficacy?

Evans argues that I have misread WCF 28.6 with regard to the relationship of baptism's time of administration and baptism's efficacy (84-85). I take the statement in WCF 28.6a, "not tied to the time of its administration," as a reference to the issue of post-baptismal sin (a hot issue at the time of the Reformation, given Rome's practice of penance), indicating baptism's *perpetual* efficacy. Evans insists that the WCF is teaching a doctrine of *latent* efficacy, inserting a temporal gap between the rite and its fruition. Whereas I provided *contextual* evidence, focusing on the earlier Reformed confessional tradition (which nowhere makes latent efficacy a confessional matter, but everywhere insists that baptism's efficacy extends through the whole of life, contra Rome), Evans provides compelling *textual* evidence for his reading, arguing that the last phrase in WCF 28.6 ("according to the counsel of God's own will, in His appointed time") is the key to understanding the first phrase. I admit that he may be right here, and my earlier essay wrong, which is why I used qualifiers such as "possibly" and "unlikely" in the original paper. But still, the case is not open and shut.

First, on Evans's reading, WCF 28.6 becomes redundant, as the paragraph's opening and closing phrases say essentially the same thing. In other words, on Evans's reading, WCF 28.6 qualifies the efficacy of baptism with regard to time twice. This would be an odd feature of 28.6, seeing how the Confession is a very tightly written document. Second, on Evans's reading, the WCF is strangely silent on the question of post-baptismal sin and the perpetual efficacy of baptism, issues which *all* the earlier major Reformed confessions addressed very directly.¹⁸ Third, on

tied to time of the baptismal event itself. For more, see my "Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy," 106-7.

¹⁸ The early Reformers argued that an additional sacrament of penance was not necessary to deal with post-baptismal sin, since baptism included a perpetually availing promise of forgiveness to believers. The Reformers dropped the practice of penance, and instead pointed people back to their baptisms for ongoing assurance of cleansing. For example, the Belgic Confession (34) states, "Neither does this Baptism only avail us at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life." Likewise, the Scots Confession (21) says, "For baptism once received continues for all of life, and is a perpetual sealing of our adoption." See also The French Confession (35) teaches the same: "[Baptism] 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." Is it not at least *possible* that WCF 28.6a stands in this broad and well established confessional tradition, intending something

Evans's reading, the Westminster divines elevated a doctrine of baptismal latency to confessional status, which would have been an historical novelty, as far as major Reformed confessions are concerned. Did the divines really intend a confessional innovation in this way?

Fourth, and most important, Evans has overlooked another critical piece of contextual evidence that helps us to recover the original intentions of the divines in 28.6. The Westminster Directory of Worship, produced and agreed upon by the same Westminster Assembly that drew up the Confession, instructed pastors to preach to their flocks about paedobaptism in this way (emphasis added):

That children, by baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and *united with believers*; and that all who are baptized in the name of Christ, do renounce, and by their baptism are bound to fight against the devil, the world, and the flesh: That they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptized: *That the inward grace and virtue of baptism is not tied to that very moment of time wherein it is administered; and that the fruit and power thereof reacheth to the whole course of our life...* That the Lord...would graciously vouchsafe to sanctify and bless his own ordinance of baptism *at this time...* That the child may be *planted* into the likeness of the death and resurrection of Christ; and that the body of sin being *destroyed* in him, he may serve God in newness of life *all his days* (emphasis added).

The key here is the statement which echoes WCF 28.6a itself: "The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered," but the "fruit and power" of baptism reaches "to the whole course of our life." This statement brings the concerns of the Westminster divines in line with the previous Reformed confessions, which insisted that baptism's efficacy *ordinarily* began at the time of administration, and *continued* on through *the whole of life*. It also harmonizes the WCF with the concern of the earlier Reformed confessions to negate the need for a post-baptismal supplemental sacrament of penance to deal with ongoing sin. It stresses the abiding power of baptism throughout the course of the believer's life.

Thus, the language of the Directory and the surrounding historical context make it plausible that WCF 28.6a should be read in connection with the earlier Reformed confessions, as a reference to baptism's *perpetual efficacy* rather than *latent efficacy*. This is not to dismiss Evans's

similar to these statements? The classic Reformed doctrine of baptism cannot be understood apart from grasping the medieval penitential system the Reformers were seeking to do away with. For details, see my "Calvin on Baptism, Penance, and Absolution."

case for his reading, but at least it shows the complexity of the matter. Perhaps more research will yield a more definitive solution.¹⁹

Further, *even on Evans's reading of WCF 28.6*, nothing rules out my view that the benefits of baptism are *ordinarily* conferred at the time of administration (though the language leaves room for exceptions as well, which I have always fully acknowledged).²⁰ Why shouldn't God's *usual* "appointed time" (WCF 28.6b) for conferring the benefits of baptism be the time of baptism itself? Why assert that God *normally* waits to give what he promises in baptism? Why shouldn't covenant infants *already* begin receiving the grace of baptism in infancy, as Calvin taught?

If the efficacy of baptism extends to *the whole of life*, that must include infancy. Of course, if our infants are simply to be regarded as *unbelievers*, as Evans suggests, then it is impossible for us to claim that baptism can mean anything until later in life. There is no way that baptism could reach "to the whole course of our life." The time of our life spent in infancy would be beyond the reach of baptismal grace. Baptism would be latent and our children unsaved until the time of conversion. But if children *ordinarily* have faith at the time of their baptisms, then they *ordinarily* receive what is offered in baptism, and baptism *ordinarily* begins to be efficacious at the time of administration. This view fits easily into the boundaries of the WCF, even if 28.6 also allows for a

¹⁹ Granted, the Directory never attained the same level of acceptance or authority as the Confession and catechisms, it is still a useful hermeneutical key. Towards the end of the section on paedobaptism, it includes instruction to pray that "if he live, and attain the years of discretion, that the Lord would so teach him by his word and Spirit, and make his baptism effectual to him, and so uphold him by his divine power and grace, that by faith he may prevail..." This should not be construed as a doctrine of latency, for that would unravel the prior teaching of the Directory. Instead, it is acknowledgement that the child will prayerfully come to a fuller appropriation of baptism's benefits through the ministry of the Word later in life. It is a prayer that baptism's efficacy, begun in infancy, would continue on all his days, "till in the end he obtain a full and final victory, and so be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation..."

²⁰ In other words, with regard to the question, "What happens at baptism?" the Westminster Standards leave us with a range of options, provided we do not absolutize our view and leave room for the Confession's qualifications. Given my commitment to the conditionality of the baptismal covenant, it should be obvious that I believe baptism's efficacy can be blocked (temporarily or permanently) by unbelief. In such a case, baptism is still an objective means of grace, but the salvation offered is rejected. For more details on WCF 28.6, see Joel Garver's fine essay, "Baptismal Regeneration and the Westminster Confession" (<http://www.joelgarver.com/writ/sacr/wcf.htm>).

variety of other views or exceptional circumstances (e.g., the case of an unbelieving recipient, like Simon Magus).²¹

Finally, it is important to bring WCF 28.6 into line with 28.1. WCF 28.1 states that baptism is “unto him” – that is, unto the one baptized -- “a sign and seal ... of *his* ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, [and] of remission of sins” (emphasis added). In other words, all of these things belong to the one baptized. True, he may reject them (for a time or forever) in unbelief. But they have still been signed and sealed to him. Any baptized person should be viewed and treated according to his baptismal status until and unless he proves otherwise.

6. Is it possible to fall from baptismal grace?

Evans accuses me of teaching that perseverance is a “separate grace” (75), resulting in a denial of the unity of salvation in Christ (87). This is a classic example of a straw man, which Evans appropriately pummels. I do think we can speak of perseverance as a *distinct* grace (even as we say that justification and sanctification are distinct graces), but it is certainly not a *separate* grace.

Evans’s ignores a critical distinction in my essay on apostasy. My article, “New Life and Apostasy,” distinguishes the covenantal perspective, which is apparent to us in the church’s administration of the covenant of grace, from the perspective of God’s eternal decrees, which is known only to God until it enters history. By using the category of “undifferentiated grace,” I was pointing out that, phenomenologically, there may be no perceptible difference between covenant members who will persevere to the end and those who will not. From a covenantal perspective, they may share everything except the gift of perseverance. They are differentiated over time, as one perseveres and the other falls.

However, this does not mean that the only difference in terms of God’s decree is perseverance as well. Against Evans’s caricature, this is what I actually wrote:

[T]his is not to say that there is no actual difference between the grace that the truly regenerate receive and the grace that future apostates receive. No doubt, there *is* a difference, since God has decreed and made provision for the perseverance of the one and not for the other (Eph. 1:11). Systematic theologians certainly have a stake in making such distinctions a part of their theology, so the TULIP must stand unchallenged. Whatever grace reprobated covenant members receive is qualified by their lack of perseverance...Perseverance is not merely the caboose on the end of the salvation train (to quote Doug Wilson once

²¹ Thus, I have no problem admitting that both my view and that of Evans fall within confessional limits.

again); rather, its presence or absence qualifies one's whole participation in the *ordo salutis*.

In other words, the blessings the reprobate covenant member receives may be phenomenologically and covenantally identical to those received by the elect covenant member. Grace is undifferentiated from a covenantal perspective (which is the perspective from which Hebrews 6 is written). But from God's perspective, these blessings are at most *only analogous* to what the elect receive. They belong to the "common operations of the Spirit" (WCF 10.4), but the lack of perseverance colors and shades even that commonality.

Most of the other difficulties Evans has with my view of perseverance stem from linguistic confusions, which I have addressed repeatedly in my writings. But before moving on, I do want to address one other criticism. Evans accuses me of over-relying on Hebrews 6 (86). But he provides no solid evidence of this, beyond the fact that I chose to write an essay on this admittedly difficult passage.

Evans compares my use of Hebrews 6 to a "low church sacramentarian whose starting point for baptismal reflection is the story of Simon Magus in Acts 8." But there are two problems with this. First, while the low church sacramentarian may give *too much* weight to Acts 8, the high church sacramentalist still has to give it *some* weight. After all, it is part of God's inspired word, and must be factored into our systematics. We are not free to ignore the difficult parts of Scripture even if we must treat them with special care (which I was attempting to do in my twenty-nine page essay, devoted to five verses). We must be committed to having no "problem passages" – we have to account for *all* of Scripture. We cannot simply wave our hands or close our eyes and make hard texts disappear.

Second, Hebrew 6, while unique in some ways, is hardly an isolated text. Not only is it one of several apostasy/warning passages in the book of Hebrews, but such warnings are scattered throughout the NT (e.g., Jn. 15:1-8; Rom. 11:1-25; 1 Cor. 10:1-13; etc.). Indeed, apostasy is a rather major theme in the biblical metanarrative, beginning with Adam and culminating with Judas. Every major turning point in the biblical story includes some horrible act of apostasy, so we must arrive at some understanding of it, even if it remains a dark mystery in many ways. Evans's complaint that I over-privilege one passage on apostasy is theologically naïve and actually reveals his own theological imbalances. With Evans, I want to maintain the unity of salvation in Christ – but *never* at the cost of forcing my own theological grid onto the text of Scripture. It is much wiser to simply admit mystery and learn to live humbly with theological tension points.

7. Does my baptismal position lead towards Arminianism?

Evans accuses me of incipient Arminianism. This is how he puts it, critiquing a quote from my paper "Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy" (87):

In order to maintain his conception of sacramental objectivity, Lusk feels compelled to minimize, to the point of disappearance, any real difference between the baptismal efficacy of the elect and the non-elect. Again, we must take with due seriousness Lusk's contention on this point: "Will you continue in the grace of baptism or fall from it? The choice is yours. But note that Scripture consistently attributes apostasy not to the withholding of grace on God's part (as though some baptisms didn't 'take'), but the abuse of grace on man's part." But if this is so, then the practical consequence is that salvation really is up to us. Thus, the role of divine sovereignty seems to be steadily diminishing in Federal Vision thinking (at this point it has been reduced to a separate and vaguely formulated "grace of perseverance") as it becomes less and less of a material factor.

Several replies are in order here. First, there is nothing "vague" about the grace of perseverance as such (e.g., Phil. 1:6; Jude 24). It is God's sovereign, free gift and man's responsibility.

Second, Evans has completely misread my text from "Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy." For some reason, he allows Calvin and himself the freedom to insist on the necessity of a human response to God's offer of salvation in baptism, without compromising the sovereignty of grace in salvation. But when *I* insist on a response, it suddenly becomes a sign of creeping Pelagianism! This looks like a hermeneutical double standard.

Besides, my language of "choosing" is biblical, covenantal language. Specifically, it is an inter-textual echo of Joshua 24:15, a reverberation that should be audible enough for any biblical scholar to detect. Unless Evans is lapsing into hyper-Calvinism, he should have no objection to my stress on human responsibility. In reality, we must choose *every day* to live faithfully as baptized Christians.²²

Third, Calvin himself taught there was only one kind of baptism, given to the elect and non-elect. In other words, *all* the baptized are offered the same baptismal grace and inducted into the same ecclesial/covenantal relationship (cf. WCF 28.1). But that does *not* mean all *receive* baptismal grace in an identical way – some receive it with a

²² Evans provides no refutation of my claim that the Scriptures consistently attribute covenant apostasy to human rebellion rather than to some defect in the proffered means of grace (e.g., Isa. 5:4; 2 Cor. 6:1). Again, human responsibility is not at all at odds with divine sovereignty, as though they were locked in a zero-sum game. We must affirm *both* to be fully Calvinian and covenantal. The problem with Arminianism is *not* that it calls on man to choose, but that it makes man's choice a matter of autonomy, independent of grace.

persevering faith, some with only a temporary faith, and still others with no faith at all. But – and this is the important point, over against Evans – Calvin insisted that human unbelief does not nullify the faithfulness of God. Baptism is what it is, no matter how we might respond to it. As I have explained in “Do I Believe in Baptismal Regeneration?”:

[Calvin’s sacramental theology] 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... [...] 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.

For Calvin, the elect and non-elect receive the *same* baptism (Eph. 4:5), even as they hear the *same* gospel preached (Rom. 1:16; 2 Cor. 2:15-17). The differentiation – which may not be apparent for some time in the covenant community -- lies in the subjective response, which may “void” baptism by unbelief, even though the sacrament “loses nothing of its nature” (*Geneva Catechism*). Baptism is not variable; the human response is. Baptism is always baptism, but not all the baptized are persevering believers. The problem of apostasy is never the fault of the sacrament.

Contrary to Calvin, Evans implies there are *two baptisms* – one for the elect, another for the non-elect. Some baptisms come with genuine promises, while others (apparently) do not. But this creates insurmountable pastoral problems. On this view, all sacramental objectivity and integrity is lost. It becomes impossible to derive any comfort from baptism because one does not know what kind of baptism he received unless he has *already* attained assurance of his election *apart from* baptism. It becomes impossible to indiscriminately exhort the covenant community to “improve” their baptisms (cf. WLC 167) because many have apparently received graceless baptisms. Calvin carefully avoided these dilemmas by stressing that there is only *one* baptism, which we may use rightly (by persevering faith) or wrongly (if

persevering faith is lacking), and thus he was able to maintain baptism's role in pastoral care and assurance.²³

Finally, I should note the fact that my whole system depends heavily on infant faith, which by all accounts is only conceivable on Calvinistic premises. If nothing else, this indicates that I am in no danger of drifting towards Arminianism unless I radically revise my baptismal theology! Infants are so obviously incapable of believing on their own, infant faith is only possible if God is absolutely sovereign in salvation, and faith is a gift rather than a human attainment or contribution. Paedofaith, you might say, is a doctrinal guardian of sovereign grace (and vice versa).

8. Does my baptismal position lead towards Rome?

I have already dealt with Evans's arguments that I have adopted a medieval Roman understanding of the sacrament. But Evans implies I am headed towards Rome in another way in his essay. He tries to create guilt by association by linking me to Nevin (87). Frankly, the way Evans presents Nevin is unfair to me and practically slanderous of Nevin. While it is true that Nevin had a "dizzy spell" during which he contemplated a jump to Rome, Evans irresponsibly omits the rest of the story. Nevin's "dizzy spell" came during a time of severe health crisis, mental and emotional exhaustion, and theological attack from his critics. When he recovered, he returned to his Calvinism, more Protestant than ever. Nevin's "dizzy spell" was unfortunate, but to pretend that I am in danger of moving towards Rome because I have favorably quoted from Nevin hardly makes sense. I could just as easily suggest that Evans is headed towards Barthianism because he cites T. F. Torrance favorably (83)! But, of course, that would not be fair.

²³ It is not entirely clear to me what Evans is trying to accomplish in critiquing my view of "universal" baptismal grace. At the very least, he needs to provide a counter-exegesis of Paul's "universal" baptismal grace language. Paul says things like "For by one Spirit we were *all* baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13) and "For *as many of you as were baptized* into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). Paul was apparently quite prepared to live with the "problems" created by a high sacramental theology, namely the real possibility of "falling" from baptismal grace through unbelief (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:1-13; 2 Cor. 6:1; Gal. 5:4). Further, WLC 167 seems to presuppose the head-for-head universality of baptismal grace; otherwise, how could *all* the baptized be exhorted to give "serious and thankful consideration" of "the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby...drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized..." Against the latency view, it is noteworthy that this answer does *not* include conversion (in the evangelical sense) as one of the ways in which baptism is to be "improved." The one baptized is already joined to Christ.

My baptismal position is considerably different from Rome's. As I have already explained elsewhere (in "Rome Won't Have Me"):

In reality, there is a deep divide. To be sure, like Rome, I see the sacraments as efficacious and instrumental. But as I learned from [Francis] Turretin, in the Reformed debate with Rome, the issue was not the *efficacy* of the sacraments as such; rather, it was the *mode* and *manner* of their efficacy (*Institutes*, 19.8.6). Whereas for Rome, the sacraments operate mechanically, and even quasi-physically, I insist with the Westminster Standards that they derive their power solely from Christ and the Spirit (WSC 91). Moreover, whereas for Rome, the sacraments function *ex opere operato* (that is, automatically, unless hindered by some mortal sin), in my view, the grace offered in the sacraments must be received by faith (WCF 27.3).

In Roman Catholic theology, the sacraments work *intrinsically*, like medicine. In Reformed theology, they work *instrumentally*, like a tool in the hand of a builder. In Rome's theology, the emphasis is on the *absence* of mortal sin, whereas for the Reformers it was on the *presence* of faith.²⁴

This essay has not touched on all the areas that need to be discussed.²⁵ For example, Evans and I could have a very profitable dialogue over the "thickness" of the ecclesiology taught in WCF 25.2. If baptism admits the one baptized to the church (WCF 28.1), and the

²⁴ These are the main problems with Rome, but there are others. Rome's doctrine of baptism is simultaneously too strong *and* too weak. See my "Calvin on Baptism, Penance, and Absolution." Turretin complains that Rome's practice of infant baptism is flawed because it is incomplete. It requires supplementation in confirmation and thus "does not quite make us Christians" (*Institutes* 19.21.3). In other words, Rome's problem is baptismal latency, after a fashion.

²⁵ At this point, the reader may be wondering how a scholar of Evans's caliber could have misread so much of my material. Actually, I think the bigger problem may be that he did not read much at all. He only cites two sources, the essays from *The Federal Vision*. But many of the questions he takes up in critiquing me are simply not dealt with in those highly specialized essays. Given that Evans sets out to defeat an entire "movement" (as he calls it), it seems like his purpose would have been better served by reading more broadly from those he is critiquing, including not just my essays, but the many other prolific writers who have been affiliated with the "Federal Vision."

The irony is that Evans accuses me of being narrowly selective in my use of historical sources to make my case (84). But this "weakness" in my historical methodology may be more a function of Evans's flawed research. Selectivity and narrowness are reversible charges in this case. Evans could be accused of screening out a good deal of historical evidence himself, as we have seen. Meanwhile, my various writings on baptism include nearly seventy pages of historical survey and analysis, covering about ten Reformed confessions and catechisms, and virtually all the major Reformed theologians up to the twentieth century.

church is defined as the kingdom of Christ and the house and family of God (WCF 25.2), then what can we say about the status of the baptized (including babies)? Frankly, this may be a more important question than any of the others broached above. In the end, any debate over baptismal efficacy is really more about ecclesiology than anything else.²⁶

I am hopeful that Evans and I will be able to extend our dialogue outside the pages of *Presbyterion*, so that we can continue learning from one another and sharpening one another until we reach full agreement in the truth. I trust that Evans is now aware that we have much more in common theologically than he would have suspected, and that that common ground can provide a solid base for fruitful, ongoing discussion. It is also my hope that I have exposed the serious deficiencies in Evans's critique and demonstrated the falsity of his claim that "Lusk's proposal stands closer to the *ex opere operato* model [of baptismal efficacy] than to the Calvinian" (78).

²⁶ In particular, see the section "Church Membership as a Soteriological Fact" in my "Do I Believe in Baptismal Regeneration?" essay. I think the primary reason Evans thinks I hold to a stronger *ex opere operato* view of baptism than even Rome (75) is because I insist that all the baptized are admitted to the visible church at the time of baptism (cf. WCF 28.1). But Evans would agree that all the baptized are admitted to the church as well. What, then, is the problem? Simply put, we have different views of the church. This is why I think WCF 25.2 should be the real focal point of discussions over the "Federal Vision," more so than WCF 28.1 or 28.6. Is the church merely a sphere where salvation is more readily available for individuals? Or is the church the firstfruits of God's redeemed humanity, his new creation in Christ Jesus? Of course, these (and other important) ecclesiological questions will have to be taken up elsewhere.