

Of Baptism (Part 1)

Rm 6:1-14; WCF 28.1 & 28.4

29 September 2019, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 a.m.
(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

This morning, we have again seen God's covenant sign of Baptism administered on the baby of believing parents!

Question: Did you know that water baptism is the outward sign of the *New Covenant*, just as circumcision was the outward sign of the *Old Covenant*!?

And did you know that, whilst there are some points on which circumcision and baptism differ, yet at the heart of it, they signify the same thing?

Why?

Well, because both circumcision and baptism have as their basis (as the reason for their existence) the promises of God made in the atoning sacrifice of our Lord Jesus!

Look, is this not clear in the link which Mary made between 1) *God's Child in her womb* and 2) the *promises God had sealed with Abraham* in the sign of circumcision?

You see, the Bible tells us: ***And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for... He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."***²

See how Mary connects God's *covenant promises to Abraham* with *Baby Jesus* in her womb?³

Even our Lord Jesus Himself made that same connection when He said (in Jn 8:56), ***"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."***⁴

Clearly, the New Testament believers in Bible times understood the connection between God's promises in the Old Testament and their fulfilment in the New Testament!

Well, the *New Covenant* came. And so, a *new* sign was needed – the sign of *baptism* which our Lord Jesus Himself instituted!⁵

Of course, He instituted the *New Covenant* there in the upper room on the night before His death. Then, when He had risen from the dead, He instituted the *New-Covenant sign*

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2006. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. 3: *The State, the Family, the Church, and the Last Things* (Chapters 23-33 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 281p.).

Some phrases & sentences which I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from these two sources.

² Cf. Lk 1:46-47 & 54-55 (emphasis mine).

³ Covenant promises that were sealed & signified by circumcision!

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (Jn 8:56). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ Yes, it was not John the *Baptist* who instituted the *New-Covenant* sign of baptism, for, you see, John's baptism was just a cleansing rite in anticipation of the coming of God's kingdom!

But it was our *Lord Jesus* who instituted the *New Covenant* and the *New-Covenant* sign.

when He said (in Mt 28:19), “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*”⁶

See how the two go together? Whoever is 1) a *disciple/follower* of Jesus will also carry 2) the *sign of baptism* on him! It was the same regarding the Old Covenant – whoever *belonged to God’s Old-Covenant people* also carried the *sign of circumcision*!

Well, here is something important, i.e. that both covenants (the old and the new) are covenants of grace!

Why?

Well, because both covenants rest on the unbreakable promises God has made to all *who believe* that they will graciously be redeemed by the Saviour – and not by their own hard work; and that they will *freely* receive *all of the benefits* earned for them by the God-sent Saviour!

You ask, “What benefits?” “What benefits is baptism a sign & seal of?”

Well, there are many benefits, but I list the following three, which form the three points of our sermon...

- Admitted
- United
- Called

Admitted (Sign that you have been admitted)

The first benefit/blessing to which the sign of your/my baptism points is the fact that you & I have been admitted to the visible church.⁷

And, really, this benefit of the New-Covenant sign is no different to the same benefit of the Old-Covenant sign of circumcision.

However, baptism, as sign of the New Covenant, covers a wider field than circumcision of the Old Covenant.

Why?

Because circumcision was the sign of admission into God’s Old-Covenant people – a people which consisted of *Jews only*,⁸ but baptism is the outward sign of our admission into the visible church, made up not just of Jews, but of people *from all nations* – and people from all walks of life, whether you’re rich or poor!

That’s why the Apostle Paul writes (1 Cor 12:13), *For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*⁹

So, the New-Covenant sign covers a wider field than the Old Covenant sign, for circumcision covered only Jews and those who became Jews, but baptism is for all God’s people from *all nations*. And, regardless of whether they’re rich or poor, if they’re in Christ, then they’re equal in God’s sight!

But, there’s another way in which baptism covers a wider field than circumcision. You see, circumcision was performed just on males, but baptism is performed on male and female!

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Mt 28:19). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles (Emphasis mine).

⁷ Cf. the first sentence of the WCF 28.1 *Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, by which the person baptised is solemnly admitted into the visible church.*

⁸ Apart from a few proselytes who were added to the Jewish nation, but then, for all practical purposes, became Jews!

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Co 12:13). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Thus, God's gracious New-Covenant sign is more inclusive!
What a sign – a sign on which no human being can improve! You see, when it comes to selecting an emblem (badge of belonging) for admission into the church, we have no right to make up our own symbol or ceremony, for God has given us baptism!¹⁰
So far regarding Point 1: “Sign that You are Admitted.”
Here is point 2...

United (Sign that you have been united Christ)

The minute a person is being born again (from above), that's the minute he/she also receives Jesus Christ in heartfelt faith as his/her Saviour & Lord.

The Bible also refers to this being-born-again as “...*the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit*” (Tit 3:5), or it says that this baptism is, “...*a circumcision not done by the hands of men but ... the circumcision done by Christ*”¹¹ (Col 2:11-12).

You see, my brother & sister, when I was two months old, I was baptised in the Dutch Reformed Church of Lydenburg (South Africa). It was the 15th August 1954, and it was on my mother's birthday.

But, you know, special as that outward sign was – and as sincere as the minister was who was baptising me – that remained a baptism done by the hands of a man. And so, that minister could not, by all his efforts, *cause* me to be born again. That would solely be the work of the Holy Spirit!

But this one thing I know for sure, i.e. that I am *indeed* born again. I have indeed been spiritually washed/baptised!

And so, that baptism sign which I received when I was two months old – that sign did eventually (and by God's grace) blossom into my *spiritual* baptism!

When *exactly* this happened, I do not know. But I do know for sure that, when I did my profession of faith at the age of seventeen, I had already undergone my rebirth!

And two years later it was confirmed for me when I was doing my military conscription year amidst a very ungodly climate which I resisted by the grace of God & the power of the Holy Spirit working within my heart & life and through my Christian witness!

So, I'm sure I have what our Lord told Nicodemus – i.e. “...*You must be born again.*”¹²

¹⁰ My adaptation of the words of Van Dixhoorn (ibid:366)

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Col 2:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

¹² Cf. Jn 3:7 *You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'*

Now, the Bible describes this wonderful, God-worked rebirth by several words. You see, the Bible talks of a person being *grafted*¹³ into Christ (Rm 11:17), or the person is being *clothed*¹⁴ with Christ (Gal 3:27), or the person is *united*¹⁵ with Christ (Rm 6:5).

And so, there is this spiritual intimacy between you and your Lord Jesus! Yes, through your spiritual rebirth (your spiritual baptism) you are united with Christ! And it's because of this unity with your Saviour that your sins have been washed away – to use a Greek word, “Your sins have been *baptizoed*¹⁶ (or *washed*) away.”

My brother & sister, it is this spiritual baptism (this washing-away of our sins by our precious Lord, and this unity with Christ) which you & I will commemorate this morning when we come to His table, where He in His Spirit will be present!

Well, this was point 2, “United – Baptism is the Outward sign Pointing to our Spiritual Rebirth & Unity with our Lord Jesus.”

Here is the last point...

Called (Sign that you have been called);

Baptism is also a sign that you & I have been called to *be* what we *say* we *are* (yes, a call to walk our talk)!

And so, what does it do to you & me when we watch someone getting baptised?

Well, does that very baptism scene not preach a message to you & me? Yes, is it not so that the outward sign of baptism is a sermon in picture form!?

I mean, does baptism's water not remind you & me of *washing* – that our sins have been “washed” away by our Lord Jesus on the cross, and that we are now to live a life given up to God, through Jesus Christ?

I tell you where one sees it even more clearly! It's where someone is baptised by *immersion*. You see, that gives the picture of a sinner being “buried” under the water, but then rising up cleansed for a new life on God's terms and for His glory! It's the picture of *dying* to my old nature and *rising* to a new life in Christ!

No wonder the Apostle Paul writes in our New Testament passage (in Rm 6:3-4), ***Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his***

¹³ ἐγκεντρίζω: to insert a shoot or bud into a growing plant—‘to graft, to bud.’ σὺ δὲ ἀγριέλαιος ὧν ἐνεκεντρίσθης ἐν αὐτοῖς ‘you who are a wild olive tree have been grafted into them’ Ro 11:17. Since grafting is not known in some cultures, it may be important to employ a descriptive phrase, for example, ‘to cause a small twig of one tree to grow in another,’ but such a descriptive phrase must almost always be accompanied by a descriptive marginal note, for example, ‘to take a bud or twig from one tree and insert it under the bark of another tree so that it will grow’ (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 516). New York: United Bible Societies).

¹⁴ ἐνδύω...: to put on clothes, without implying any particular article of clothing—‘to clothe, to dress, to put on’ (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 524). New York: United Bible Societies).

¹⁵ σύμφυτοι and adjective masculine plural nominative of σύμφυτος, ον: pertaining to being closely associated in a similar experience—‘to be like, to be one with.’ εἰ γὰρ σύμφυτοι γενόμεν τῷ ὁμοιώματι τοῦ θανάτου αὐτοῦ ‘for if we are one with him in dying as he died’ Ro 6:5 (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 791). New York: United Bible Societies).

¹⁶ In Greek, the verb *baptizō* (βαπτίζω) means, a) wash..., b) baptize..., c) cause religious experience (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 2, p. 43). New York: United Bible Societies).

death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. ¹⁷

So, outward baptism is a sermon in picture form! Yes, every time when you & I witness someone being baptised, what message does it give us – what call does it make on our hearts?

Well, it calls you & me to *be* what we *are* in Christ!

It calls us to surrender our lives to God through Jesus our Lord!

Someone might ask, “But, Pastor, if the outward sign of baptism refers then to the believer’s *rebirth* (to his/her being *born again*), and if it calls the believer to walk according to his/her *faith* (a faith which a baby cannot yet have), how is it then possible that we give baptism (this sign of faith) to babies who cannot yet have faith and who cannot yet walk their talk?”

Well, here is our Bible-based answer...

My brother & sister,

Baptising a baby does not make that baby right with God, just as little as circumcising an old-covenant baby made that baby right with God.¹⁸

Indeed, the outward sign of faith does not *work* faith.

And so, the *sign* of God’s promise does not automatically guarantee the *fulfilment* of God’s promise. Rather, what God does guarantee, is: “My promises will be fulfilled *to all who believe...*!”¹⁹

That’s why we give the sign of God’s covenant to adults who *believe*, but also to their children, just as was done in the Old Covenant!

Besides, baptism is not a sign of the child’s *already existing* faith; no, it is a sign of what the child will *in future* receive by faith! Indeed, the minute that child believes (be it at the age of two or six or ten or eighteen or sixty), that’s the very minute God’s covenant promises are applied to him/her.²⁰

So, yes, in the case of adults, faith must be present *before* the sign is applied, but in the case of children of believing parents (that is, *covenant children* – not just *any* children) the *sign* comes first and *then* faith.

So, re the covenant child then: *the point is that the administering of the sign is not tied to the time when faith is exercised. If it is wrong to give the sign of faith to someone before he has faith, then it was wrong for the people in Israel to circumcise infants. But God explicitly commanded them to do so.*²¹

My brother & sister, if on *theological* grounds, someone still finds it hard to understand that covenant baptism of a baby is biblically correct, then there’s still *historical* grounds which make this plain. You see, the early Christian theologian, Origen, who wrote just after

¹⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ro 6:3–4). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles (Emphasis mine).

¹⁸ Cf. Rm 2:28-29, **For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.**

²⁹ **But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.**

¹⁹ Cf. e.g. Eph 2:8-9, **For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast** (Emphasis mine).

²⁰ Of course, this is not true for elect babies dying in infancy, for they are saved without showing any signs of faith.

²¹ Well-said words of Sproul (ibid:122).

200 AD and who travelled quite a bit and thus had a good idea of the practices of the early church – yes, Origen says that infant baptism was received from the tradition of the apostles.²²

So, what do we see?

Well, that before that baby can say, “O God, I believe Your promises,” God has already graciously extended to him His covenant’s sign & seal for the day when he would, by grace through faith, receive Jesus as his Saviour & Lord!

What gracious God! What wonderful Saviour!

AMEN (2071 words excluding footnotes)

²² **Origen Adamantius** (Ὀριγένης Ἀδαμάντιος, *Ōrigénēs Adamántios*; 184/185 – 253/254).

<https://bible.org/question/what-are-historical-origins-infant-baptism>

Also cf. Origen’s Commentaries on Romans, specifically on Rom 5:9 where Origen writes, “The Church receives from the apostles the tradition of giving baptism even to infants” [https://books.google.co.nz/books?id=l62q-d4Wi20C&pg=PA209&lpg=PA209&dq=Origen+commentaries+on+Romans+5:9&source=bl&ots=Ze_l6T67BU&sig=HsP3BQnmfb4jmgoRDFRp6Jt6dl4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiAhIOZlbTQAhWEjZQKHdJ6BCKQ6AEIzAB#v=onepage&q=Origen%20commentaries%20on%20Romans%205%3A9&f=false]

Apart from Origen’s clear words, there are also the studies done by the German scholar, Joachim Jeremias, whose research revealed that infant baptism was the universal practice of the church by 200 A.D. (at least in North Africa). For this cf. Jeremias, J. 2004. *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*. Eugene, OR : Wipf & Stock Publishers. The original publication was in German in 1960 by the title, “Die Kindertaufe in den ersten vier Jahrhunderten.”