

A Theology of Baptism for the Church's Future: A Word to Paedobaptists and Baptists
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Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind (1 Pet. 3.8)

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!² It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!³ It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore (Ps 133.1-3)

If there is any one secret of success, it lies in the ability to get the other person's point of view - HF

Introduction

The subject is children growing up in the churches from infancy and their baptism.¹ The concern is parental and pastoral. Note the direction of this paper.

1) First, it is important to recognize that some biblical teachings are primary and others are secondary.² The duty pastors have to pursue like-mindedness (1 Pet 3.8) wisely begins with areas of agreement to carefully build on the foundation, which is Christ *with baptism subordinate to the gospel* (1 Cor 3.10; 1.17).³

2) Second, pastors should agree that parents have the obligation to present their children to Christ and to baptism as shown by the rebuke of the disciples about children brought to Him

¹ I am tempted to add, "in the child-rearing years," which is the emphasis here, but it would be better to say, "mainly or initially in the child-rearing years" because parents have a gospel nurturing reference to baptism in the testimony they give to their children *all their lives*.

² Obviously, the thesis proposed here works within the framework of the debate regarding children of the church. As I will argue, this is not an attempt to eliminate strong conviction from either side. The view presented here is seeking a way to season our convictions with love. It seeks to inform the conscience on matters that pertain to the sacrament of baptism that has its own idiosyncrasies. Thus, there is no template here for doctrinal differences in general. Indeed, a correlate for seeking unity, as Dunn puts it in another context, is "an open-eyed and level-headed love which recognizes evil for what it is...in the revulsion against evil and in the commitment to what is good" (*Romans II*, 753). It is also worth mentioning that though I affirm that convictions as to the best view can and should be maintained, I also want to stress that not all doctrines are the same, not all biblical teachings are of the essence of Christianity. As Whitlock says about Calvin: "All doctrines were not of equal importance to Calvin. He acknowledged a hierarchy of doctrines, beginning with the primacy of God and salvation only in Christ. He deemed some doctrines to be nonessential, disagreement on which did not offer sufficient grounds for schism" (*Divided We Fall: Overcoming a History of Christian Disunity*, P & R Publishing, 2017), pp. 54-55. In the *Institutes*, the reformer stressed things "so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God's mercy; and the like" 4.1.12. *The Philadelphia Confession of Faith with Catechism* (The National Foundation for Christian Education, Marshallton, Delaware) speaks of baptism related matters that are not of the "essence of Christianity" and that are attained "to the *best* of our understanding," (*Italics mine*, Appendix, p. 59); even in debate, the writers of this appendix display a hearty irenic spirit.

³ As Berkouwer states, 1 Corinthians 1.17 does not devalue baptism; it warns against overestimating by "detaching it from all the connections and contexts in which God had placed it" to thus lose "its relation to... true faith" (*Sacraments*, 119).

(Mat 19.13-15; Mk 10.13-16; Lk 18.15-17) and by the fact that baptism is His command (Mat 28.18-20).⁴

3) Third, the issue needs to be carefully stated to avoid old ruts.⁵ It is not infant baptism versus believer's baptism; not babies versus adults. It is the presentation of children to Christ and to baptism as infants *for nurture* unto faith *compared with* the presentation of children to Christ and to baptism *through nurture* unto faith.⁶

⁴ Thus, what I am trying to do initially in this paper is apply the idea of the least common denominator in a good sense of a common point at which problem solving begins by working from the lowest common denominator to solve something that at first seems impossible such as adding fractions that have different denominators. For example, we should all agree, and stress the agreement, that the primary duty of parents is to present their children to Christ. Then, I add "and to baptism in the name of the trinity" because that is fundamental in gospel proclamation according to the Great Commission.

⁵ A rut to avoid is exemplified by Zwingli in his (and the) first defense of infant baptism (1524) and based on Matthew 19.13-14, when he says, "if anyone forbids children to be baptized [as infants], he forbids them to come to Christ." *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli*, W. P. Stephens (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986), p. 196. Thus, the polarization begins as he goes on to refute the Anabaptists. But to say that parents who present their children to Christ and to baptism through nurture actually forbid their coming to Him is a *reductio* of Zwingli's use of this text!

⁶ Baptizing for nurture unto faith may not precisely fit with those Lutherans (and other similar thinkers) who believe that faith is given to infants at their baptism, as David Scaer, "The Lutheran View," in *Infants and the Children of the Church: Five Views on Theology and Ministry* (ed. Adam Harwood and Kevin E. Lawson; Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Publishing Group, 2017). This belief along with all views of baptismal regeneration are outside the purview of this paper and are not embraced, but the Orthodox, Lutheran, Catholic, Reformed, and Baptist authors in *Infants and the Children of the Church: Five Views on Theology and Ministry* do emphasize child nurture in the gospel and the need for them to mature unto a public faith in Jesus as is stated in the conclusion: "Regardless of our theological traditions, the writers of this resource share a common goal of raising our children to embrace the Christian faith as their own," *Infants and Children in the Church: Five Views on Theology and Ministry* (ed. Adam Harwood and Kevin E. Lawson; Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2017). Kindle Edition. Kindle Locations 3745-3746). As we hope to show, this outlook provides encouragement to both sets of loving parents that they are being obedient and there is room for improvement.

4) Fourth, we should also agree that only one of these ways is best.⁷ One way does justice to the whole of Scripture better than the other.⁸ In this context, pastors hold to theological systems believing they correctly represent the infallible teaching of Scripture, but they also recognize that their grasp of Scripture is fallible.⁹ For example, they are convinced that their view of baptism is the most consistent with the whole of Scripture on a topic about which the Bible is remarkably silent.¹⁰ Neither Paedobaptist nor Baptist has an *express* command or example for the view they take to be best. Nowhere in Scripture do we have a command or example of the baptism of an infant. Nowhere in Scripture do we have a command or example of the baptism of a child that grew up in the church and that was baptized, not as an infant, but

⁷ Notably, age is not the issue because even after confession of faith in the risen Christ (in either system of thought) parents still present their children to Him by reference to baptism. The sign continues to be a reference point for explaining the gospel to them. Of course, age is an issue in the debate over *the best way* for parents to obey the Lord, whether it is baptism for nurture or through nurture.

⁸We must remember that theology is a normed norm; it has a secondary normative function under Scripture alone. A theological tradition codified in historic creeds of the Christian faith has an authority in the churches that may serve as a standard for office holding. However, its authority is derivative, fallible, and always subordinate to the norming norm of Scripture which is infallible (as WCF 32.4 states: All synods or councils, since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both). We might boldly affirm that the historic formulations give us the theology of the church as radically important teaching guides to which Christians in local churches subscribe to confess their faith. They do so to varying degrees as they grow in their understanding of theology that has been historically formulated by the working of the Spirit in the church over the ages. Members that are informed historically tend to avoid reinventing the wheel.

Therefore, pastoral work is served by exegesis of the text in its historical-redemptive context, as it operates with enriched awareness of the system of sound words arrived at in systematics that is ever in touch with the history of theology. Muller (*The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation*, Zondervan, 1991) gives good guidance here that helps us remember that the pastor must do his work with theological and philosophical awareness, thus as pastor-theologian-philosopher he must wrestle with such notions as hermeneutical circularity, linearity of redemptive history, the development of theology, and presuppositional awareness: "the curricular priority of Scripture over church history, and of history over contemporary dogmatics and practice, actually serves to underscore how the hermeneutical circle functions in a context where the authority of Scripture is prior to that of the church, and the authority of both Scripture and ecumenical creeds is prior to the whims of the individual exegete. The linear movement...from Scripture through history to doctrine and practice both affirms and mirrors the doctrine of the authority of Scripture. A hermeneutical circle that overturns the linearity of salvation-history and of the development of Christian doctrine by imposing its presuppositions on texts will never be able to find an authoritative point of departure."

To properly confess a good confession (as Jesus did before Pilate) the local church, pastor and flock, must be able to make some precise distinctions, grasp clear definitions, and continually test its confession by the infallible standard of Scripture. For pastor's to do their part in this confessional process, they must have a well-grounded theology and skill in critical thinking to thereby teach the church how to live under the authority of Christ and fulfill their mission of learning for holiness to God's glory.

⁹ In this connection, a general statement tied to the thesis of this paper can be given by comparison with how we approach theological systems. Pastors may hold to a theological system believing that it is the best understanding of Christian truth. But they do not believe that it is the only understanding of Christian truth. There are other Christian belief systems that have truth. What they believe is that the system they embrace and teach is the most consistent. It is the best view out there, as they see it, that does justice to the whole of Scripture; it is better than other views. They have good reasons for conviction, reasons that can be tested and reevaluated. This requires a willingness to dialogue seeking more unity of thought (1 Pet 3.8) by engaging critically with a spirit of openminded humility. For example, pastors surely believe that persons of both camps on "not forsaking the assembly" obey the Lord's command, even though one group connects the Lord's Day gathering to the Sabbath and the other does not, each believing that their interpretation is best. Also, pastors surely believe that persons of both camps on the frequency of communion obey the command of observance, even though one way or the other does better justice to Scripture. Similarly, regarding the baptism of the children growing up in the church from infancy, pastors ought to believe that one way or the other is the best way for parents to obey the command of Christ to present their children to Him and to baptism.

¹⁰ Granted, not being explicit does not eliminate the possibility that it is implicit. My point is that those on both sides of this discussion need to acknowledge the implicit nature of their respective conclusions. This prevents the tacit assumption that these conclusions are beyond reexamination; it prevents subtle denial that there can be anything good in the other view. It promotes a humble spirit that is required of those who confess the truth that is in Christ.

through gospel nurture. So, pastors on both sides should humbly admit that their convictions about this silence are based on what they think is best through careful inference-making.¹¹ They arrive at what they believe God's word teaches.¹² And they instruct parents to present their children to baptism as infants *for* a process of nurture, or they instruct parents to present their children to baptism *through* a process of nurture (Eph 6.1-4; Col 3.20-21; Deut 6.4-9). Either way, the goal is faith in Christ (Rom 10.9-10).

But some parents present their children to Christ in a way that is less than the best in the eyes of their pastors. What then are leaders to do when members change churches or visit at

¹¹A somewhat testy exchange between John Frame and Richard Muller about Muller's book, *The Study of Theology* provides us with some helpful summary insights into Muller's hermeneutical model and its application to this discussion of baptism (The full title is *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation*, Zondervan, 1991). The exchange can be found in Frame's article, "Muller on Theology," WTJ 56, No. 1 (1994) 133-151 and Muller's reply, "The Study of Theology Revisited: A Response to John Frame," WTJ 56, No. 2 (1994) 409-417. Muller expresses two concerns near the end of his reply to Frame (415). First, he is concerned that "our churchly theological language must 'serve the truth of Scripture' rather than the truth of Scripture serving our postbiblical theological terminology" (417). This is the circularity of Frame that he opposes. He calls it "Retrospective argumentation" that "short-circuits the process and blinds the interpreter to the logic as well as to the history of the doctrinal conclusion" (Response to Frame, 415). For example, the doctrine of the Trinity is historically postcanonical; therefore, the exegete must not so take the postcanonical formulation for granted "that it is pressed into the text as if it were grammatically, linguistically and historically present in its final dogmatic form" for as the orthodox of the seventeenth century knew, "if an exegete or theologian begins with a dogmatic conclusion and reads it back into the text, false or improper conclusions can easily be imposed on texts" then the interpreter is blocked "from weighing, clarifying, and when necessary, critiquing his presuppositions," which means that the interpreter is allowed "to govern the meaning of the text from the perspective of his own relation to it" (*Ibid.*, 414).

Muller recognizes our presence in a hermeneutical circle and he acknowledges that we will use John 1 to argue the doctrine of the Trinity (a doctrine that as such is not present there), but the reality of our confessionally ingrained presuppositions, he says, "cannot be taken as license to read history backward and ignore the process of interpretation by which doctrines (even true doctrines) develop" for if we ignore this development we are in danger of assuming that the interpreter "has direct access, apart from the text, to the mind of God" (*Ibid.*, 412). Conscious work with the linear development of post-canonical doctrines is therefore vital, per Muller, to preserve the Protestant and Reformed doctrine of *sola scriptura*: "A hermeneutical circle that overturns the linearity of salvation-history and of the development of Christian doctrine by imposing its presuppositions on texts will never be able to find an authoritative point of departure" (*Ibid.*, 411). In the end, Muller defends the circular priority of Scripture over church history "in a context where the authority of Scripture is prior to that of the church, and the authority of both Scripture and ecumenical creeds is prior to the whims of the individual exegete" (*Ibid.*).

Finally, Muller has a second concern that reinforces the importance of the historic creeds and confessions, shall I say, as radically important study guides that enable the church to test and improve its confession that it seeks to root deeply in the authority of the written word of God. He says, "I am also profoundly concerned that Christian teachers [let's add: pastors teaching theology by expository preaching] maintain the primacy of Scripture without losing sight of the genuine but subordinate value of churchly creeds, confessions, and theological systems" (*Ibid.*, 417).

Applied to baptism, pastors of divergent convictions need this exhortation not to so take the postcanonical formulation of their theological systems and confessions for granted "that it is pressed into the text as if it were grammatically, linguistically and historically present in its final dogmatic form." Otherwise, "if an exegete or theologian begins with a dogmatic conclusion and reads it back into the text, false or improper conclusions can easily be imposed on texts" then the interpreter is blocked "from weighing, clarifying, and when necessary, critiquing his presuppositions," which means that the interpreter is allowed "to govern the meaning of the text from the perspective of his own relation to it." Surely, those on both sides of the subject of presenting children to Christ and to baptism will do well to heed Muller's warning.

¹² Oliphint has some helpful comments on what subscription to the WCF involves that apply in principle to all who take Scripture to be the norming norm and their confession to be derivative and fallible in *Did God Really Say? Affirming the Truthfulness and Trustworthiness of Scripture*, ed., David Garner (P&R Publishing, 2012), 4-11. Specifically on the process that involves inference-making, he says, "What we confess in our Confession is that a particular confession contains nothing less than biblical truth...in subscribing to this confession, we are agreeing that what it articulates, is, by good and necessary consequence, the very truth of God himself, revealed in Scripture, and systematically articulated in the confession, p. 9.

times of communion?¹³ The principles of a valid baptism defended here (objectivity, simplicity, convergence¹⁴) help answer this question by giving pastors reasons to accept baptisms different from their own *in matters of church membership, good standing, and table fellowship*.¹⁵ This stipulates the meaning of validity.¹⁶ We are on an uphill climb; up Mount Everest.¹⁷ The steps of

¹³All pastors have to come to grips with differences in one way or another and they ought to do so in a spirit of loving pastoral care. It is not their job to constrain parents to believe what they believe. By loving instruction, they are able to convince some parents of the “best” view and not other parents. Obviously, some parents may opt to present their children to Christ in a way that is less than the best in the eyes of their pastors. This difference exists in the body of Christ in the churches throughout the world, it surfaces within local churches, and it comes into play in various relationships between churches (members changing churches, visiting churches at times of communion, joint efforts of church planting, and so forth).

¹⁴ Filled out, the three principles are the objectivity of baptism as a word from God in symbol, ritual simplicity regarding gospel symbols in the shift from the OT to the NT, and the convergence of the alternate baptismal practices in the dynamic life of the church. These principles are offered as proof for the validity of both approaches to baptism arguing that both fulfill the basic ingredients of a baptism, namely, the use of water in the name of the trinity to obey the command of Christ to present children to Him and to baptism. These principles help Baptists and Paedobaptists avoid conducting themselves like the north-going and the south-going Zacks of the children’s story that remain in locked horns while the trees lose their leaves and the snow begins to fly.

¹⁵ In the interest of united thinking on membership in the visible local church, it may be helpful to distinguish three aspects: nurturing membership that begins at birth and continues throughout life, ritual membership by baptism that accents God’s promises, and communicant membership by public confession of faith that opens the way to the Table. These distinctions no doubt need to be refined, but this seems to be a good start in seeking broad agreement.

¹⁶ This does not mean that pastors give up their convictions as to what they think is best. But they must trust God’s sanctifying work to bring parents to the best view through preaching and gentle persuasion. They of course believe that a particular way for parents to present their children to Christ and to baptism is what God’s word says infallibly. But they do not believe that their interpretation of Scripture on this matter is infallible. That belongs to Scripture alone. Thus, to say that Scripture teaches x is to affirm that I fallibly believe to the best of my understanding that x is what God says. If we simply remind ourselves that our interpretations are sound as they accord with Scripture, then when we affirm that Scripture teaches x, we mean that that is what we understand to be in accord with Scripture as we best understand it; the view we hold is the best interpretation as we earnestly and faithfully strive to know God by His word better and better.

¹⁷ Hopefully, the climb itself will include much profitable clashing of steel by which iron sharpens iron. There are dangers, as Baptist Pastor Cook put it to me, “you are trying to walk a very narrow plank . . . with crocodiles below!” To this Dan King says, “the pastor is used to dancing in mine fields.” My wife says, “It is fine that you may be hanging on a rope on the side of Everest, just as long as the rope is not tied around your neck.” The goal has its mine fields and the task seems impossible. It is just as unattainable as the goal of being holy as God is holy, but it ever remains the goal that draws us closer to God in His family. The goal is perfection, which is the light that shines on the face of Christ and into whose image we are being transformed.

our ascent are the three principles that encourage pastors (and parents) on both sides of this debate to grant validity to the other's practice.¹⁸

I. The first principle objectivity

...means that the essential ingredients of baptism (water to obey Christ in the name of the trinity) are bound together by *the promise of God*. It means that baptism is primarily a testimony that God gives, and secondarily a testimony that we give. It does not dispense grace *ex opere operato* or regenerate. Baptism reiterates the gospel in symbol.¹⁹

A. Acts 2.38 establishes objectivity: **Repent and be baptized ... for the forgiveness of your sins.**²⁰

Consider how it does so. Forgiveness is not by baptism but by Christ through repentant-faith in a conjunctive relation to baptism. Connected to faith but not saving shows that baptism signifies God's promise of forgiveness by faith. And God's promise through baptism is true, even if the profession is insincere. By analogy, the serpent-sign in the wilderness promised life by faith, even if people did not look and live.²¹ Also, even if people do not look to Christ, the gospel promise remains. Likewise, baptism is God's sign that He lifts up as a promise of forgiveness to

¹⁸ This is not an attempt to probe the heart. At issue here is simply the stated goal of the use of water in the context of the church and her proclamation. Accordingly, using water to baptize as a prank between teenagers is not sufficient for a valid baptism because it obviously lacks the intent to fulfill the command of Christ. That is true if one sprinkles the other three times; it is true even if he dunks his friend three times forward in the backyard pool. It would still fail to be valid if he splashed his friend three times, irreverently pronouncing the names of the triune God. Could we grant validity to a church practice that intends to fulfill the command of Christ, but that sprinkles the candidate with ashes? On the basis that Jesus commanded the church to go and baptize with water in the performance of a purifying ritual (a ritual that symbolizes purification, forgiveness, and the cleansing of sin, Jn 3.22-26) it is extremely difficult to grant that sprinkling with ashes fulfills an essential requirement of a baptism: using water in a cleansing ritual. The "silly" idea of baptizing with ashes brings us to the third requirement of a baptism: recognition of the trinity. Consider again the case of someone coming to join the church claiming that he was baptized with ashes. We should not accept his claim to baptism and we should call this person to receive water baptism. This odd case turns out to be parallel with the case of the disciples in Acts 19 who were allegedly "baptized" without ever hearing about the Holy Spirit. Those baptized with ashes were baptized without ever hearing about water; they had some radically anomalous understanding of baptism. In both cases, there is failure regarding an essential requirement (water for one and the trinity by implication for the other). Acts 19 shows us that these disciples were never baptized in the first place because the ritual lacked recognition (proclamation) of the Holy Spirit and, by implication, proper recognition of the trinity (thus, when they were actually baptized, it was in the name of Jesus, 19.5). Therefore, we have three essentials: the church intending to obey Christ (in a bond of baptism with proclamation), the use of water, and recognition of the authority of the triune God. These three essentials do not decide the question of Baptist versus Infant Baptist practice; they decide the question of baptism, of what is necessary for a baptism.

¹⁹ When the church speaks in the ritual, God speaks. As it has been said, when the church baptizes, God baptizes through the church. We must also emphasize the fact that a NT ritual is not a bare reminder like a heap of stones left as a testimony by someone no longer there. God is present with His family in a special way in the observance of baptism in public worship!

²⁰ The conjunction of faith and baptism serves three things: it reveals the proper administration to converts, it brings them into the church, and it shows that baptism is a sign of God's promise. On the first point, the conjunction reveals the proper administration of baptism to converts. It is unmistakable that faith, or confession of faith from the administrator's point of view, is required for the church to administer baptism to converts (2.41): those who received his word were baptized. On the second point, this conjunction brings converts into the church as is evident in the context in that repentance is the way of deliverance from the crooked generation (2.40) to enter the new Israel as John announced (Lk 3.7-8) and Paul proclaimed (1 Cor 12.13).

²¹ I thank Derek Gonzales for suggesting the use of this analogy of the serpent lifted up in the wilderness, Num 21.8.

all who believe; the sign remains (=the promise remains) even if the baptized do not benefit from it by faith.²²

B. Objectivity establishes validity

... by holding the basics of baptism together to form an actual baptism, an actual word of promise from God. His action makes baptism real, even if confessed faith is unreal, or even if no faith is confessed, as in infant baptism. Mentioning the lack of faith is not trying to decide which view is best. Instead, it is arguing that both ways of presenting to Christ and to baptism obey His command because God's promise in baptism is the central point of reference.²³

1. A word to Paedobaptists

It may be hard for the Paedobaptists to conclude from objectivity that presenting to Christ and to baptism *through* nurture is being obedient, even if not in the best way.²⁴ But they can affirm that these parents do *not* neglect baptism *so long as they seek to obey Christ and to nurture in the gospel that baptism symbolizes*.²⁵ By the healthy debate, that is not the concern of this paper, they decide which way of parental obedience is best.²⁶ But some parents under the

²² For the adults at Pentecost, faith is portrayed in this symbolic act of obedience, even if there is no genuine faith. Once we begin to discuss the reference to children here in Acts 2 and how their faith comes into view, we enter the debate over the best understanding of our subject. But we should prioritize. First priority is the nurture of children on the gospel, second are the principles of validity, and third is the polemics of the best view. At this third level, we rightly seek to establish which view is regular and which is irregular (see below), which obeys the command to baptize more consistently, which does better justice to the whole of Scripture. This third level is necessary, but it is not the concern of this paper. If you embrace the principles of validity offered here, then the giggler on the cooker is removed and the pressure is released. Then, calm and irenic debate can move forward most constructively for mutual benefit that comes by depending on God's promise.

²³ Surely, then, when we view the simple washing symbol of baptism during worship, we can affirm that the gospel word of promise that God gives is primary. Paedobaptists ought to acknowledge that because God's promise is primary, then parents that present their children to Christ and to baptism through nurture do obey the command of Christ. Baptists ought to acknowledge that because God's promise is primary, then parents that present their children to Christ and to baptism as infants for nurture do obey the command of Christ.

²⁴ Danian Heron suggests that it is helpful to think of the practice of baptism by comparison with participation in communion. The time spent in the ministry of the word when the church is at the Table is included in the practice of communion, even though the actual partaking is at the end of the process. Likewise, the process of nurturing on the *promise given in baptism that leads to baptism* is baptismal practice, even though the actual washing rite is at the end of the process. Also, the process of nurturing on the *promise given in baptism that commences with baptism* is baptismal practice, even though the actual washing rite is at the beginning of the process. Neither view is truncated; both views use baptism for gospel nurture unto the confession of Christ as risen Lord. It is simply that the one looks back to baptism in nurturing children on the gospel symbolized in baptism (if you believe, you have forgiveness). The other looks forward to baptism in nurturing children on the gospel symbolized in baptism (if you believe, you have forgiveness). There is a "delay" of child baptism that may be taken to be sinful neglect (*WCF* 28.4-5 speaks of neglecting baptism as a great sin). I will speak to this point later but for now let me stress the fact that the presentation to Christ and to baptism through nurture child baptism performed by Baptists is first and foremost a sign of God's promise (i.e. based on objectivity). The timing of the baptism in Baptist practice is obviously different from the timing in Paedobaptist practice. However, if we emphasize that Baptist practice uses water in the name of the trinity to obey the command of Christ and that Baptist practice leads to the proclamation of God's promise in baptism in His presence in church worship, then surely Paedobaptist pastors can grant validity to the practice of parents who opt for a way of presenting their children to Christ and to baptism that is "less than the best."

²⁵ It seems fair to emphasize differences between contemporary Baptists and the antipaedobaptists of the 1640's. Also, *under the three principles of validity*, Baptists are not "anti"-infant baptism for though they view infant baptism to be irregular, they grant its validity in matters of membership, good standing, and Table fellowship in the church. It also seems important to emphasize that the ritual failure to baptize infants is hardly comparable to things like the great sin cited by Joseph in response to Potiphar's wife (Gen 39.9: "this great...sin against God").

²⁶ After all, unbaptized children growing up from infancy in the church have the promises of the Lord offered to them in the milieu of their entire lives. Of course, this may be why Paedobaptist pastors seek baptism before nurture.

their care may seek a different way.²⁷ Even though things are out of order in the eyes of these pastors, they can know that the parents *do not neglect* the baptism of their children, given that the children are nurtured in the gospel *promised* objectively in baptism, and are brought to faith and to baptism by *God's gracious promise-keeping*, and thus they are brought to the very sign in which *God gives His sure word of promise*. And He does so despite whatever disorder obtains.²⁸

2. A word to Baptists

The possibility of mere profession leads to a question: what happens if a baptized church member says: “when I was baptized professing faith, I really did not know the Lord. So, I would like to be baptized because faith was missing”? Why should we discourage such a baptism?²⁹

Answer: if the washing he received was not a baptism, then there was no gospel sign and what was thought to be God's promise given in His presence in worship is nullified. God's promise was no more real than the baptism. Thus, the sign performed in the church is emptied of meaning; it was not real without faith. However, this makes God dependent on man to give His promise in the symbol. Then, He can only give a sure promise in baptism if man believes when baptized. However, faith is depending on God and His word enacted in the baptism sign. Of course, no one profits from God's promise in the symbol without faith. But His promise does not depend on man. Therefore, even if faith is not present, *baptism's primary significance remains because God is present in the gathering for worship, and in baptism He gives His promise that whoever believes is forgiven*.

So, what this person needs is not a baptism. He needs loving pastoral care that points him to the gospel the ritual proclaims. Confession is not the complement of something incomplete, as if God's promise in baptism is incomplete. Faith is not a human component that actualizes God's word in a sign. It is necessary for benefit, but it is not a necessary subjective element that makes the symbolic washing into a baptism.³⁰

C. Objective validity opens the door to the regular/irregular distinction

²⁷ In at least one way, both sides affirm, I assume, that all the children of all the churches of Christ have the promises of the gospel of the covenant Lord that is signaled in baptism offered to them: if you believe you have forgiveness. Being raised in the context of preaching this covenant promise and of training in it at home, the children may be considered in this sense, children of the covenant. Therefore, unbaptized children growing up from infancy in either type of church have the promises of the Lord offered to them in the milieu of their entire lives.

²⁸ On this same line of thought, the Paedobaptist can also affirm that not only parents like these within the Infant Baptist church, but also Baptist parents do not neglect the baptism of their (covenant) children growing up in the church from infancy. The church can affirm that Baptist practice regarding the little ones is a way by which they do obey the command of Christ (even if it is not the “best” way to obey Him).

²⁹ The administrators baptized him *in the worship gathering of the church in God's name and presence* on charitable consideration of his credible confession. Lacking inward faith, he received the outward sign and became a member of the visible church. On the level of membership, the implications could be far-reaching. Let's say that since his baptism this person has cast the deciding vote on a number of important church decisions. Now having never been baptized, which is why he seeks baptism, then not only is his membership nullified but his votes are nullified and the church has to make new motions as they somehow undue the impact of the important decisions.

³⁰ Instead, in the call to the obedience of baptism, God's summons to repentance is heard with urgency by all who hear, Berkouwer, *Sacraments*, 177-182. As I see it, like nothing else, a robust emphasis on God's promising word in baptism is the most important principle in the restoration of baptism, to use the words of Timothy George, to restore baptism “to its rightful place as a central liturgical act of Christian worship,” *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, eds. Thomas Schreiner and Shawn Wright (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2006) xvii.

... which means that someone is presenting children in an irregular way, *but both ways are valid* because both ways are rooted in God's promise.³¹ To be sure, one view may be said to be more appropriate than the other.³² One does more justice to the larger picture of Scripture than the other.³³ But love covers a multitude of irregularities; God's love, that is, and therefore, so should ours.³⁴ Then on the foundation that God's promise is primary, pastors can affirm that parents who present their children to Christ and to baptism, either *for* nurture or *through* nurture, do so in obedience to the command of God.³⁵

II. The second principle simplicity³⁶ ... means that there are less rituals in the new covenant with relaxed rigor

³¹ Then, the debate regarding the baptism of children growing up in the church can take place in a fresh context because both parties give priority to God's voice in the sign. Both can thankfully rejoice in the gospel that God gives through His cleansing sign. So, Baptist pastors and parents can observe an infant being baptized for a process of nurture unto faith, and rejoice in the good news! Paedobaptist pastors and parents can observe the nurture of children unto baptism, and rejoice in the nurture that has God's promise in baptism always in view, and they can rejoice in the gospel that the child's baptism itself proclaims.

³² I thank my son Jonathan for the language here of more appropriate versus less appropriate.

³³ Logically, of course, both cannot be the best way to obey Christ, so, healthy and profitable debate is good for the church between pastors, members, and biblical scholars, but under the umbrella of the principles of validity the giggler is removed from the pressure cooker as the right hand of fellowship is extended to one another in love.

³⁴ This stance is far superior to the polarizing claims that affirm: a) by omitting the baptism of infants, in what you fail to do, *you commit a great sin*, versus b) by baptizing infants you fail to baptize those growing up in the church on confession of faith as you ought; *you fail to do what you ought to do*.

³⁵ Therefore, for all parties baptized (confessors of whatever age or infants) faith is not required to make baptism a sign of God's promise. Objectively, by God's institution and design, baptism is a real and sure reiteration of the gospel. On this basis, we ought to acknowledge validity, even if a baptism is without faith as is the case of infants and as is the case where confession of faith in baptism is later deemed to have been a false confession. So, baptism with water in the name of the trinity to obey Christ's command is genuine and it is *once for all*.

³⁶ A barrier to accepting the validity of the "other view" is the idea that it is in breach of a command. The issue of divine command is important to both sides in this debate. The following thoughts give perspectives that help reduce polarization. Clearly, there is a difference between cardinal doctrines and simple ceremonies, however important the ceremonies may be. Recall that Paul called pastors to carefully build on the foundation that is Christ (1 Cor 3.10-11). His context is unity and a subordinate place for baptism (1 Cor 1.13-17). Also, if we add a commitment to find ways to promote unity between churches, then our grip on our view of the failures of others regarding baptism ought to be softened. Ritual failure is not as serious as misunderstanding the nature of God and the person of Christ. Now, if we can agree on this point while looking at ourselves, can we also agree when we look at our brothers in the church? In keeping with the golden rule of love, can we say the following whole-heartedly: If our brothers who lead other churches are wrong in their beliefs in some aspect of the sacraments, then their failure is not the same as violating one of the Ten Commandments? Can we agree that such failure is not as serious as misunderstanding the nature of God and the person of Christ? We ought to be able to think this way; otherwise, we may all too easily violate the command of love on which all the law and revealed promises hang! Also, to soften how both sides in this debate emphasize divine command, we must stress that the three principles have their ground in the command to love, especially, one another as Christ has loved us. The goal here is not to remove God's command but to rightly inform our consciences to better understand and obey it.

The NT lacks what the OT has to an unusual extent: extreme penalties for failures of ritual details.³⁷ For example, death came to those who grabbed the ark to keep it from hitting the ground (2 Sam 6.6-7; 1 Sam 6.19-20). *However, there are no sanctions attached to baptism in the NT.*³⁸ Compare the failure to *baptize* infants with the failure to *circumcise* infants. Scripture is silent regarding the former, but it is not silent about the failure of Moses to circumcise his son, such that **the LORD ... sought to put him to death** (Ex 4.24-26).³⁹ Surely, it proves too much when this text is applied to the church today to the effect that parents within the Paedobaptist church, and all Baptist parents, that do not present their infants to baptism, incur God's wrath.⁴⁰ The clear implication that these parents stand on the brink of death until their children are baptized shows that this application fails by *reductio ad absurdum*.⁴¹

But this is not an impasse because a theology of acceptance is already in play at the Lord's Table. Infant Baptist churches tacitly grant validity to alternate practices when they welcome parents to the Table without requiring the baptism of their newborns, whether they are members or visitors, and visitors that may include Baptists.⁴² Also, Baptist churches tacitly grant validity when they admit baptized believers to communion without requiring that their baptisms took place through confession. In these ways, pastors do not exert even mild discipline; they

³⁷ I speak here of NT rituals. In other areas there are explicit sanctions. For example, various sanctions exist regarding departure from God's commandments including the punishment of eternal death by the Lord (1 Cor. 6.9-10) and the withdrawal of the right hand of fellowship by the church (1 Cor. 5.9-11). By contrast, does Scripture sanction breaches of order (or regularity) regarding the two NT rituals? Scripture does not do so. Again, God's severe discipline of Corinthian practice at the Table was due to breeches of love and unity and not ritual detail. This severity accents the need to promote unity regarding differences of baptismal conviction. The promotion of unity by accepting the validity of infant baptism is not a denial of the duty we have to maintain good order. Baptists who accept infant baptism as in fact baptism continue to practice the baptism of children growing up in the church only on confession of faith; they continue this practice because of how they view God's command *regarding good order* in the administration of baptism. Paedobaptists who grant validity to the practice of waiting to baptize children of the church continue to practice infant baptism; they continue this practice because of how they view God's command *regarding good order* in the administration of baptism. But no sections exist like Deut 23.2 Ezra 10.1-19.

³⁸ Those attached to communion concern personal faith and fellowship, not divinely stipulated details of observance. Eating too much food and getting drunk (1 Cor. 11) are violations of obedience among those who are one loaf in Christ. In fact, *the Corinthian example shows how important it is to promote love and unity with respect to the sacraments*. Love, of course, does not eliminate discipline. This argument for unity and toning things down a bit on judging the wrongs of others on ritual detail (either way) does not mean that the principles of church discipline do not have a place. They do. Matthew 18 applies and so do all exhortations to loving encouragement, reproof, and correction.

³⁹ This is no doubt a supporting text for those at the Westminster Assembly who speak of neglecting infant baptism as a great and even a heinous sin (WCF 28.4-5: "infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized... it is a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance"). This seems like an insurmountable obstacle to accepting baptistic practice regarding babies as valid. But there are reasons to think that this is not an impasse.

⁴⁰ This implication is drawn out by G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (1964; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 277.

⁴¹ Genesis 17.14: "Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." What are the implications of this text for the young children and their parents? How has a young two-year-old, for example, broken the covenant? The text is objective and solidaric. He is counted with his parents in their failure to circumcise him. Again, it proves too much when this text is applied to the church today to the effect that parents within the Paedobaptist church that do not present their infants to baptism (and all Baptist parents as well) are to be cut off from the church. The clear implication that these parents break God's covenant until their children are baptized shows that this application also fails by *reductio ad absurdum*.

⁴² Also, do these parents and their unbaptized children have the promise of the gospel symbolized in baptism that all who repent have forgiveness of sin? Can we then not also say that when parents teach their children the promise that baptism symbolizes that they are obeying the command of Christ to baptize them with water in the name of the trinity, even though the way they teach the promise of baptism is by calling the children to baptism on confession of faith? Paedobaptists may consider this to be irregular but surely they have grounds on which to consider it to be a valid baptismal practice.

allow partaking despite baptisms different from their own, because love prevails.⁴³ Less better ways of presenting children to Christ and to baptism do not lead to discipline.⁴⁴ If we accent God's promise and de-accent ritual failure, then affirming validity to "irregular" baptisms is surely reasonable.⁴⁵

Also, the principles of objectivity and simplicity allow the affirmation that immersion is *the best way* to baptize.⁴⁶ If God gives His promise in the sign, then what is taken to be less than the best amount of water, is still a baptism and need not be repeated.⁴⁷ Baptists do this in practice when they "fence" the Table without insisting on any particular detail about baptism.⁴⁸ Recall that even if a command about ritual detail is broken, we *still have no direction from the Lord as to what to do about it*.⁴⁹

III. The third principle convergence

⁴³ Is it not a simple step of consistent love to pull back from emphasizing the great sin of neglecting to baptize infants? Some who subscribe to the WCF may argue that the great sin (28.5) pertains to baptism in general and not to neglecting infant baptism (although the framers surely connected 28.5 with 28.4). This is a huge obstacle, but if there is love for Christ and His family then we can wrestle with it to good ends. Consider the case of children growing up in a paedobaptist church without being baptized as infants. In time, say in their early teens, these children confess faith and are baptized. This could not happen if they had been cut off from the church and excommunicated along with their parents for breaking a divine command. Instead, patient love rules and the church teaches their parents the gospel and teaches the children the gospel that is signified in baptism: repent, trust in the risen Lord, and you will be saved. Then these children who grew up in the church from infancy are baptized on confession of faith. Performing these baptisms, *the paedobaptist church grants validity not just to adult baptism by faith but it grants validity to the baptism of children, growing up in the church from infancy, on confession of faith*. More work is needed on this point and I would appreciate comment from those here who subscribe to the WCF. But I dare say that the practice in reformed churches on this point is better than their theology; it reflects a better and more loving theology of baptism for the church's future.

⁴⁴ This is especially so when the penalties sever fellowship between one family member and another who are one loaf incorporated into Christ by one baptism! Pastors who are conscience driven to love the parents under their care, should give preeminence to these principles of objectivity and simplicity in the context of the one body symbolized by baptism (1 Cor 12.13).

⁴⁵ God's objective promise in baptism surely overrides mistakes of ritual detail. Is it not reasonable to conclude that since God's presence and speech in baptism is a blessing despite human failure in general for which we confess our sins daily, then (*a fortiori*) it is even more a blessing despite human failure in particular breeches regarding ritual detail? Does this not apply either way, no matter which view one thinks is incorrect on details of a simple ritual? On ritual details, we are no longer under the rigorous OT system.

⁴⁶ Surely, knowing that the sign represents Christian unity ought to throw the command of loving one another into bold relief, even at the very moment that you conclude that your brother misunderstands God's will on the amount of water to be used, because you know God's promise is still proclaimed in the symbolic washing, despite human failure.

⁴⁷ The main things are that God gives His word in baptism, those who trust Him are saved, and unity is promoted between local churches.

⁴⁸ Typically, the table is "fenced" by speaking to the conscience and saying that invited to the Table are those who believe in Christ alone for salvation, who have been baptized, and who are members in good standing of an evangelical church. Validity is granted when there is no mention or insistence on any particular detail about their baptism as to "when or how." Then, in practice, validity is granted to their baptism of whatever form.

⁴⁹ Consider the direct disobedience to the command of Christ to keep silent about His miracles (as in Mk 7.36). Our Lord does not sanction the disobedient people, instead, He shows great patience and forbearance. If Jesus forgives such failure to obey a direct command, how much more ought pastors to forgive the "less than the best" failures of parents to obey an indirect command (one that is grasped by logical implication) regarding a simple NT ritual; how much more ought pastors show great patience with parents whom they view as obedient to the Lord in presenting their children to Christ in a way that is "less than the best." It seems to me that our Lord's example shows us that He prioritizes His commandments and obedience to them. After all, "obedience is better than sacrifice" is a lesson from our Lord about the true spirit and intent of keeping His word in matters of ritual. Besides, we are in the time of fulfillment and greater grace in contrast to the rigors of the time of promise.

...means that the differences in the way parents present their children to Christ are eventually eliminated.⁵⁰ The church has a dynamic nature, which means that it is not frozen in time. So, in the end the distinct practices converge; in time irregularities iron themselves out. In Paedobaptist practice, confession of faith is eventually added to baptism, and in Baptist practice, baptism is eventually added to nurture. In the pursuit of unity, pastors can wholeheartedly acknowledge validity to the ritual practice they deem irregular at a particular moment and for a short season.⁵¹ In time, a convergence surfaces (despite irregularities).⁵² Then, pastors will grant that parents who present their children to Christ and to baptism in different ways, still do so in obedience to Him.⁵³

Conclusions

1) First, gospel nurture of children has first priority. The great sin is to neglect the nurture of the little ones.⁵⁴

2) Second, the gospel is highlighted.⁵⁵ Notably, baptism, as a doctrine, as something we receive, and as something we observe, objectively testifies of God's saving promise, gives comfort, and strengthens our faith *all the days of our lives*.

⁵⁰ This point stands if both sides believe that the nurture of children growing up in the church is of paramount importance, if both sides emphasize God's promise (objectivity) and relaxed ritual rigor (simplicity), and if in both settings, the children are taught the gospel and called to own Christ personally. To be sure, such confession should not be turned into some kind of emotional crisis. What Vos (*Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 5, pp. 244–245) has to say about such a crisis is apropos for baptized children, the unbaptized, unbelieving family members, and unbelieving neighbors. Pointing to Christ and the need to confess Him publicly is lifelong; confession is not restricted to a public word in the church, but applies in the home, church, and playground.

⁵¹ We do well to be clear on what this means. Baptist pastors view the particular moment of an infant's baptism to be irregular, but they can observe that in a short time, a few short years, confession of faith in Christ emerges by God's grace from their nurture on the gospel. Paedobaptist pastors view the time that passes before a child of the church is baptized to be irregular, but they can observe that by God's grace in a short time, just a few years, baptism will be added to the nurture of children unto confession of faith in Christ.

⁵² Consider the following examples of how this understanding of validity gives guidance to parents. In a church that practices believer baptism, parents of paedobaptist leanings can comfortably become members, if they agree to the three principles of validity. Say, for some reason, they desire to be under the discipline of the baptist congregation, they can in good conscience wait on the baptism of their children until they confess faith. They can trust God by giving priority to the preaching diet and wait upon Him for the regularization of baptism regarding their young ones. In a church that practices infant baptism, parents of baptist leanings can comfortably become members on the basis of the three principles of validity. They can in good conscience submit to have their infant children baptized and nurture them toward a confession of faith. They can trust God by giving priority to the preaching diet and wait upon Him for the regularization of baptism by the confession of faith. There are many creative alternatives like these that peaceably and meaningfully apply under the umbrella of the three principles. As I see it, these principles should be taught, debated, and hammered out by ministerial students as essential preparation for pastoring Christ's lambs.

⁵³ An important point of openminded humility is that quarreling is a vice but arguing is a virtue. So, healthy argument regarding the many layers of implication and regarding all the specific passages on baptism is required. Of course, the argument here on validity is that *humble love* will allow us to consider our interpretation to be the view that is regular as *the best way* to do justice to all of Scripture. Surely, this is "striving to be of one mind" (Phil 1.27).

⁵⁴ A closely associated great sin is unloving pastoral care of Christ's church. So, we should test the principles of validity, and embrace them with a priority that is second only to nurture. This will season your conscience, rightly inform it, I believe, and thereby put the polemics regarding who has the best view of the subjects of baptism in place as third in the order of priorities. First priority is gospel nurture of children, second is validity per the three principles, and third is the debate over what the regular practice in the church should be based on which way of presenting children to Christ in baptism does fuller justice to all of Scripture. Perhaps we have a lesson on prioritizing on God's commands in the fact that Jesus often did not sanction people who disobeyed His direct commands regarding silence (as in Mk 7.36). Healthy debate over the best view and its implementation properly continues.

⁵⁵ These principles place a premium on God's promise that He gives in the gospel of the NT and in the sign of baptism.

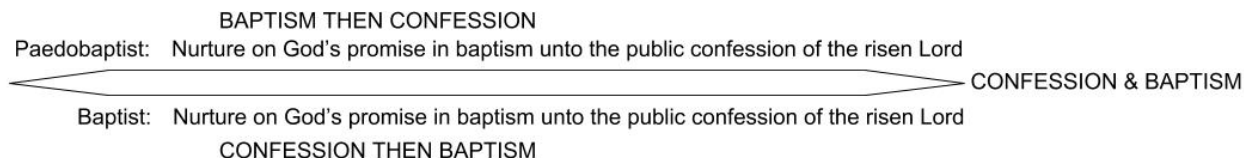
3) Finally, truth is guided by love

Love is to guide how pastors carry themselves in the truth. So, they are to have convictions and lead the church by them. But baptism is a sign of oneness (1 Cor 12.13), which ought to cause us to *do our best to find ways to promote unity, accent where we agree, and carefully build on Christ.*⁵⁶ Thus, the validity principles are primary things that should be hammered out by students in preparation for ministry. I urge leaders in the churches and seminaries to give members and students a view of baptism that accents God's promise in the sign so that their pastoral care of Christ's Church will demonstrate love, unity, and peace.

⁵⁶ The duty brother/pastors have to pursue like-mindedness (all of you, have unity of mind...with brotherly love, 1 Pet 3.8) wisely begins with areas of agreement to carefully build on the foundation, which is Christ *with baptism as subordinate to the gospel and to unity in a context where Paul rebukes Corinthian divisiveness.* As Berkouwer states, 1 Corinthians 1.17 does not devalue baptism; it warns against overestimating it by "detaching it from all the connections and contexts in which God had placed it" to thus lose "its relation to... true faith" (*Sacraments*, 119).

Appendix

The convergence of baptism and confession in dynamic church life through the same means in which parents present their children to Christ and to baptism *for or through* nurture unto public confession of faith:



A final plea: Scripture is the standard for both the policies of loving pastoral care and for the proper administration of baptism. It is on God's authority that the distinction between a valid baptismal practice and the practice that does better justice to the whole of Scripture is to be judged. It is by the ultimate and final standard of God's word that the idea that the presentation to Christ and to baptism is fundamental and a good place on which to build a theology of baptismal unity. Therefore, where the emphases of this paper accord with Scripture, I urge pastors and teachers to cultivate this outlook, especially the three principles of validity. I urge you to do so among ministerial students and church members for unity of mind (1 Pet 3.8) about what it means for parents to obey the command of Christ to present their children to Him and to baptism, either for nurture or through nurture unto confession of faith in Jesus Christ the risen Lord. After all, He is the Head of one church that has one baptism.