

2.5 The Covenant Family, Children, and Three Principles of Valid Baptism

Last time we made the point that loving and godly parents ought to opt for a reformed diet on the promises of the new covenant, even if that means attending a church that has a different baptismal practice (in either direction). Parents promote healthy spiritual growth for themselves and their children in this way with a good conscience if they give due place to a broadminded view of a valid baptism.

1A. Stating the question of validity

Valid refers to what the church is to accept as an actual baptism, not in need of repeating. More generally, it also refers to baptismal practice as acceptable *without* church discipline (cf. "to properly partake of communion" may mean, "You must be baptized as a believer" or "you must be obedient in having your infant children baptized").

We are speaking here of the visible church with fallible administrators. Therefore, we should apply baptism practice with reasonable charity, and with awareness that baptism is a sign of Christian unity (Eph. 4:1-6). In this light, it is not an overstatement to say that it is deplorable and shameful that baptism is one of the great divides in the history of the Christian church.

By contrast, we must ask, "to promote unity, how can we argue that *both sides* of this debate can hold to their view as an "ought" while acknowledging validity to the opposing view?"

2A. Principles Grounding the Validity of Baptism

1B. The objectivity of the sacraments

This point, much neglected outside of the reformed tradition, is extremely important regarding the issue of validity. It means that the sacraments are not only testimonies that the participants give, but they are also testimonies that God gives. As God-appointed signs, they point to what God is saying in the gospel. They reiterate the word of Scripture in prophetic enactments. When the church speaks in a ritual, God speaks; when the church baptizes, God baptizes through the church. We must also emphasize the fact that NT rituals are not bare reminders like a heap of stones left as a testimony of someone no longer present. God is present with His family in a special way in the observance of the sacraments. Furthermore, signs are seals (Rom. 4:11), which means that God not only speaks in the visual aids, but He also confirms the promises to the ears of the hearers. They are means by which God encourages His people along the way on their spiritual journey.

This is not to deny the subjectivity of the sacraments. The church gives its confession, but the church's voice is in response to the words and acts of God. Given that the words and acts of God ought to have priority in our understanding of baptism, and given the fact that the administration of baptism is performed by God-appointed, though fallible hands, then it is safe to say that those who hold to believer baptism ought to admit the validity of infant baptism. This is simply saying that if we major on what has priority in the sacraments, the sign and seal that God gives, if we concentrate on God's voice in sign and seal and not on the fallibility that attaches to the practice of the church, then we will acknowledge that voice by admitting validity. To reject the validity of the church's action in the sacraments is to relativize or obscure the action of God in the sacraments. A broadminded posture on validity emerges from serious attention to the voice of God in sign and seal.

Objectivity comports with the following basic requirements of a valid baptism: that the church carry it out to obey the commission of Christ, by a duly authorized minister of the gospel, and in the name of the triune God. These basics emerge from the fact that the Lord's commission is a *command* given to the *corporate church* (not individuals) to mark discipleship commitment *under the authority of the trinity*.

2B. The Simplicity of New Covenant Rituals

A significant hurdle in accepting the validity of all Christian baptisms performed in the name of the triune God is the thought that some (those who hold the other view) are in breach of the command of God. If we ought to baptize children in the way of the obedience of faith, then this question arises, "how can we look lightly at the breach of a divine ought and accept infant

baptism?" Likewise, some ask, if we ought to baptize infants by divine command, then how can the church fail to sanction or discipline those parents who break God's covenant? The objectivity of the sacraments gives us a foundation on which to build an answer to these concerns. Is it not reasonable to conclude that since God's presence in the sacraments is a blessing despite human failure in general, then it is a blessing despite human failure in particular breeches regarding ritual detail (either way, no matter which view you think is incorrect)?

The fact that new covenant ritual observance is much simpler than old covenant ritual observance gives meaningful support to this line of thought. There is simplicity to new covenant rituals with respect to both their number and the rigor of their practice. In the new order brought by Christ, there is no longer a long list of ritual requirements specifying amounts of water, proper mixtures, detailed procedures, and extreme sanctions. This last fact of extreme sanctions is most important to our discussion. It is remarkable that the NT lacks what the OT possessed to an unusual extent: extreme penalties and sanctions for breeches of the smallest ritual detail. For example, touching the ark brought death even to those who grabbed it to keep it from falling to the ground (2 Sam. 6:6-7; 1 Sam. 6:19-20). However, there are absolutely no sanctions whatever attached to baptismal practice in the NT, and those attached to communion concern personal faith and interpersonal fellowship, not divinely stipulated details of observance. Eating too much food and getting drunk are not violations of divine stipulations regarding the Lord's Table ritual; they are violations of faith and obedience among those who profess attachment to one loaf and family with one Father and one baptism.

Therefore, additional to the foundation supplied by objectivity, the simplicity of new covenant rituals leads us reasonably to conclude that breeches of ritual detail regarding the proper subjects ought not to have strong sanctions. This is especially so when they sever fellowship between one family member and another who are one loaf incorporated into Christ by one baptism! If we accent the voice of God and de-accent sanctioning failures of the church on ritual detail, then acknowledging validity to baptismal practice we view as irregular is both reasonable and prudent. We should give preeminence to the objectivity of the sacraments and to their NT simplicity in the context of the one body and one loaf symbolized by baptism and communion.

3B. The Dynamic Nature of the Christian Family

Dynamic refers to the opposite of static; it means that the family cannot be viewed as somehow frozen in space and time as it hears the commands and promises of God regarding the sacraments. In this light, another consideration supports the acknowledgment of the validity of both infant baptism and believer baptism. It enables tolerance and latitude if we embrace the reality that *over time the irregularities iron themselves out*. Eventually confession of faith on the part of children is added to baptism in orthodox infant Baptist practice, and baptism is eventually added to the nurture of children in Baptist practice. When we couple patient longsuffering with the pursuit of unity in the bond of peace, then we can wholeheartedly acknowledge validity to those ritual practices we deem irregular *at a particular moment and for a short season*. They not only express the voice of God in a context of ritual simplicity and church unity, but they also regularize themselves in the unfolding process of family and church life.

Prioritizing in relation to the subjects of baptism

The validity of baptism (per the 3 principles) reveals the priority of godly nurture (ideally on a reformed diet) in relation to searching for answers to the question of the subjects of baptism. It also serves to promote the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. If members grant validity in this way coupled with heartfelt submission to the church and her eldership, then they can subordinate their personal views of ritual detail regarding the subjects of baptism to local church practice. They ought to take up the best means available to them for instruction in the whole counsel of God. Per the validity of baptism, they can do so in good conscience with the great goal of nurturing their children under the umbrella of the NT covenant family.