



## The significance of baptism

The sacraments were created by God to picture before our eyes the gospel truth proclaimed to us through the preaching. They strengthen the faith the Holy Spirit has kindled in believers. The Lord has given us the sacraments in order that He might *“more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel”* that *“God graciously grants us forgiveness of sins and everlasting life because of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross.”* To help us in our weakness, baptism which is the first of the sacraments, is a visual aid confirming that what we have been told in the gospel is true and sure.

### **Baptism admonishes and confirms**

The Heidelberg Catechism devotes two entire Lord's Days to the doctrine of baptism. These Lord's Days draw our attention to how baptism directs us to the benefit of Christ's one sacrifice accomplished on the cross. Question 69 asks, *“How does holy baptism signify and seal to you that the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross benefits you?”* The German and Latin texts of the Catechism are worded somewhat differently. They read, *“How does holy baptism admonish you and confirm to you that the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross benefits you?”*

Baptism *admonishes* you. The verb to “admonish” should not be read in an unfavourable sense. Admonition today has a negative connotation but for the writers of the catechism “to admonish” meant “to bring to remembrance.” Baptism brings to remembrance how, in Jesus Christ, we can have communion with the living God. We can hold fast to God's Word and trust the reliability of God's covenant promises. This is highlighted by the prayer that precedes the administration of baptism which brings to remembrance the Lord's redemptive acts:

*Almighty, eternal God, in thy righteous judgment, thou hast punished the unbelieving and unrepentant world with the flood, but in thy great mercy hast saved and protected the believer Noah and his family. Thou hast drowned the obstinate Pharaoh and all his host in the Red Sea, but led thy people Israel through the midst of the sea on dry ground – by which baptism was signified.*

Part of this prayer finds its basis in 1 Peter 3:20,21. The Lord did not save Noah and his family from the waters of the flood because they were better or less sinful than others, but because of his covenant mercy. God led Israel through the Red Sea to maintain the promises He had sworn to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For this reason the prayer adds, *“by which baptism was signified.”* Baptism directs us to the faithfulness, mercy and grace of the Lord but also to his judgement (the drowning of unbelievers during the flood and at the Red Sea).

The water of baptism does not save us. In fact, it will drown us without faith. We are made clean through the precious blood of the Son of God. The shedding of his blood on the cross is *“our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, that is, the devil, and enter into the spiritual land of Canaan”* (Belgic Confession Article 34). Baptism confirms the promise of the Lord's salvation and liberation. Just as the people of Israel shared in a common deliverance at the Red Sea, the sacrament of baptism displays the church's common redemption in Christ.

### **Baptism as a sign and seal**

Baptism brings to remembrance God's covenant acts in Jesus Christ by being a sign and seal of the promises. We are familiar with all sorts of signs. Road signs indicate where we are going and how far we are away from our destination. Baptism is a sign which keeps us on the road of God's

promises proclaimed to us in the preaching. A seal is a guarantee of authenticity. A document is sealed so that we know the contents are not forged and what is contained in it has not been written by another. In ancient times kings would seal documents and proclamations with their signet ring. When Joseph became the Egyptian governor he received from Pharaoh the royal seal, which enabled him to issue authoritative commands. Seals were also used for the ratification of a covenant. Baptism, as a seal, guarantees the trustworthiness of what God promises to you. He adopts you to be his children and heirs and promises (guarantees) to provide you with all good, avert all evil, or turn it to your benefit.

Baptism is a lifetime guarantee. The Lord promises that He will never fail you. He will be faithful to you from your youth to old age. Thus you can always fall back on your baptism to receive strength when you are struggling, frustrated or depressed. The Lord's promises do not change when you feel useless, hopeless, helpless or insignificant. Mountains may shake and the earth may be in turmoil but God's promises of forgiveness of sins and renewal of life are unshakeably firm. He makes good on his promises. Christ signs it in his own blood.

### **Washing away of sins through union with Christ**

The sacrament of baptism externalizes what Christ does internally. As surely as water washes away dirt from the body, so certainly his blood and Spirit wash away the impurity of our souls, that is all my sins (Lord's Day 26). Each baptism is the sharing of one common baptism, which unites the church with Christ the Head. *"For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ"* (Galatians 3:27). Thus we acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins (Nicene Creed; see also Calvin's Commentary on Ephesians 4:5).

In the Old Testament the sign and seal of the washing away of sin was blood. The atoning blood of Christ put an end to the need for any further bloodshed.

*We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law (Romans 10:4), has by his shed blood put an end to every other shedding of blood that one could or would make as an expiation or satisfaction for sins. He has abolished circumcision, which involved blood, and has instituted in its place the sacrament of baptism.*

(Belgic Confession Article 34)

Christ institutes baptism to uncover the rich contents of what He does for us and in us. Baptism teaches how blood had to be shed to make atonement for our sins. Baptism pictures before our eyes how all the riches of redemption and the blessings of salvation are granted to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. He shed his blood as our substitute and paid the price we owed. He covered our sin and guilt. Christ *"loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word..."* (Ephesians 5:25, 26)

### **Walking in the new obedience**

The sacrament of baptism may not be used out of custom or superstition. Washed with Christ's blood, we are called and obliged by the Lord to a new obedience. What we are promised in our baptism must be received in faith. As John Calvin wrote,

*"But from this sacrament, as from all others, we obtain only as much as we receive in faith. If we lack faith, this will be evidence of our ungratefulness, which renders us chargeable before God, because we have not believed the promises given there."*

(*Institutes* 4.15.15)

Baptism teaches us to humble ourselves before God, to deny ourselves and confess our Saviour. We seek our cleansing and salvation outside of ourselves in Christ Jesus. We must cry out to the Lord for mercy. John preached, *"Repent and do works which befit repentance."* This is also the message which our baptism accents and underlines. Saved by grace is not a license to continue living in sin. Baptism is burial with Christ. Romans 6 reminds us that we have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Having been baptized we must count ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ. This requires constant self-denial. We do not belong to the world but

we belong to Christ. Baptism is the outward sign of an inward change that is taking place in our lives. We are washed with the Spirit so that we become dead to sin and lead a holy and blameless life (Lord's Day 26, Answer 70).

### **Baptism in view of God's Name**

Every baptism reminds us that we are placed in communion with the Triune God. After Christ laid the foundation of our salvation by his death and resurrection He commissioned his apostles to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18,19).

To be baptized in the name of the Triune God means that the Lord God has claimed us. In every situation we are under the authority of God. Being under the authority of the Triune God we are placed in communion with Him. We belong to Him as the branches of the vine, as the children of the Father, as the sheep of the good Shepherd and as the bride of Christ.

Through baptism we have the signature of the Triune God written upon us. We have the sign and seal of the Father's never-ending care, of the washing away of all our sins through Christ's blood, and the daily renewal of our life through the Holy Spirit. If we do not use our baptism, the very water which was sprinkled on our foreheads will testify against us. May this never happen to us! Having been admonished by baptism let us walk in communion with the Triune God, whose name we are to praise and adore.

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