

## The Promises of Baptism

### Part 1

On the joyous occasion when a child of the congregation is baptized, more is done than just the simple ceremony of sprinkling the child with water. The Form for the Baptism of Infants is read. Baptism is a ceremony rich in content. The parents should know about the meaning and background of baptism. Moreover, the children, when they grow up, must learn why they themselves were baptized, for a sacrament is not a magical ceremony but a meaningful sign.<sup>1</sup> The Form explains the meaning of this sacrament so that we would know what God wants to point out to us in baptism. One of the things explained in the Form is the meaning of the baptismal formula. Before our Lord Jesus Christ left this world to go to heaven, he said to his disciples: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). This is explained in the Form as a three-fold statement:

1. The Father testifies to us that he establishes an eternal covenant of grace with us....
2. The Son promises us that he washes us in his blood from all our sins....
3. The Holy Spirit assures us that he will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ....

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<sup>1</sup> See on the meaning of sacraments, N. H. Gootjes, “Tekenen en Zegel” in *Radix*, 24 (1998) 2–20, included in English translation as chapter 8 in this book.

The question can be raised whether the explanation given in the Form for Baptism is correct. Perhaps the most difficult of these three statements is the third—that of the Holy Spirit. Can these words be applied to all children that are baptized? Does the Spirit dwell in all of them?

The Scriptures are clear on the issue of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He does not automatically dwell in God's people. The basic text for this is what Peter explained to his hearers on the day of Pentecost: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Peter is speaking here to Jews who had taken responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:36). Now that they have seen and heard of the exaltation of Jesus Christ, they should no longer reject him, but rather they ought to believe in him. Then their sins will be forgiven, and they will even receive the Holy Spirit. This shows that those who believe in God and in Jesus Christ will receive the Holy Spirit.

That believers have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them is confirmed in many texts from the New Testament. To mention one, when Paul emphasized the importance of the Holy Spirit for a Christian life, he stated: "You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you" (Rom. 8:9). He added: "And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ" (Rom. 8:9). Those who believe in God and in Jesus Christ whom he has sent have received the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> Since the day of Pentecost, receiving the Holy Spirit is the result of acknowledging Jesus Christ. Those who are without the Spirit do not believe in God and in Jesus Christ whom he has sent. The Holy Spirit dwells in all who have a New Testament faith.<sup>3</sup>

The question must be raised how the Form for Baptism can speak of indwelling in connection with very young children. How can the Form say about infants that the Spirit will dwell in them? How can the Spirit dwell in them when they are still infants and know nothing consciously?

Once the problem is seen on the issue of the Holy Spirit, it can be extended to the statements concerning the Father and the Son. In connection

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<sup>2</sup> See for this, e.g. R. B. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979) 16–20; N. H. Gootjes, "De doop met de Heilige Geest," *Radix* 13 (1987) 153–154. (A translation, "The Baptism with the Holy Spirit and the Meaning of Pentecost" is found as chapter 6 in this book.)

<sup>3</sup> See also 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; Eph. 2:21–22; 2 Tim. 1:14; 1 Peter 2:5; see on these texts e.g. N. H. Gootjes, "De doop met de Heilige Geest," 154ff.

with the Father, the Form for Baptism speaks about providing us with all good and averting all evil or turning it to our benefit. This contains a reference to Romans 8:28. But Paul is here speaking about those who “love [God], who have been called according to his purpose.” In other words, he is speaking about the believers, the elect. How can the Form for Baptism use this statement about believers for all baptized children?

A similar question arises in connection with the promise of the Son. According to the Form, “he washes us in his blood from all our sins and unites us with him in his death and resurrection.” This, too, is taken from Scripture; it can be found in Romans 6:5. Paul is writing here about those who are united with Christ. How can the Form for Baptism use this text for all who are baptized? Is the Form correct in applying these three statements to the infants of believers?

In the following discussion, we will deal particularly with the promise concerning the Holy Spirit, although at the end we will come back to all three promises. The issue is how the statement that the Spirit will dwell in them can be applied to all baptized children.

### Other Forms

The first thing to do is to take a look at the background of these statements. Our form is the result of a development. Do these earlier forms, too, speak of a promise of the Spirit, or is our form an exception? Is the Form in line with the general views of the Reformation?

Our Form dates from the sixteenth century. In its present form, it dates from 1574. This was an adapted, shortened version of the Form made by Peter Datheen in 1568. Datheen took as his model the form made in Heidelberg for the Reformed churches in the Palatinate, published in 1563. And that goes back to the form made for Geneva.<sup>4</sup> In other words, our form is the result of a development from Geneva via Heidelberg to the Reformed liturgy in The Netherlands.

In these forms, variations occur in formulating the promise of the Spirit. Datheen did not speak of indwelling. He formulated the promise of the Spirit as follows: “The Holy Spirit will be in eternity the teacher and comforter of us and our children.”<sup>5</sup> This formulation was taken over from

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<sup>4</sup> See C. Trimp, *Formulieren en gebeden* (Kampen: Van den Berg 1978) 37.

<sup>5</sup> See for the text, J. Ens, *Kort historischbericht* (ed. S. Van Velzen; Kampen: S. Van Velzen, Jr., 1864) 164.

the Form of Heidelberg, made by Olevianus.<sup>6</sup>

Calvin's formulation was different again. He refers in connection with the Holy Spirit to regeneration, which he takes as giving up everything of ourselves into death and rising up to a new life.<sup>7</sup> He adds: "We receive therefore in baptism a double grace and benefit from our God unless we in our lack of gratitude destroy the power of this sacrament."<sup>8</sup> It should be noted how Calvin emphasized the reality of the gift. He sees it as received in baptism, unless it is expressly refused.

This brief overview shows that there was no unanimity in the formulation of the statement concerning the Spirit. Three different expressions are used, taken from different texts of Scripture. The forms, however, speak of a promise of the Holy Spirit which only the believers will receive.<sup>9</sup> Yet, they are not only applied to the adult believers but also to their children. And the question must be asked how the promise of the Holy Spirit could be applied so generally. Experience teaches us that not all baptized children eventually come to faith and begin to obey God.

## Calvin

If we investigate the theological background of the statement concerning the Holy Spirit, we discover that it has been defended in two ways. This becomes apparent when the views of two Reformed theologians, Calvin and Ursinus, are investigated. To begin with Calvin, there was a development in his explanation of infant baptism. In the very first edition of his *Institutes*, Calvin defended infant baptism on the basis that children can have faith. He stated that no one is saved except by faith. For this reason, baptism also rightly applies to infants, who possess faith in common with adults.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See for the text, W. Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Zurich: Zollikon, n.d.) 145.

<sup>7</sup> The term "regeneration" is used in the same sense in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 33.

<sup>8</sup> See for the text, *Calvini Opera Selecta* (5 vols.; ed. P. Barth and G. Niesel; Munich: Kaiser, 1970) 2.31ff.

<sup>9</sup> A reservation must be made for the formulation in the Heidelberg form. The reference to the Holy Spirit as teacher and comforter is taken from John 14:26 and is specifically applied to Christ's disciples; see C. Trimp, *Betwist schriftgezag* (Groningen: Vuurbaak, 1970) 25–26.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* (1536) 4.23 in *Calvini Opera Selecta*, 1.136; translation in F. L. Battles, ed. and trans., *Institution of the Christian Religion (1536)* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 137–138.

In the later editions of his *Institutes*, Calvin changed his whole approach to the issue of infant baptism. He flatly contradicts his previous argument. He now says that infants ought to be put in a different category than adults. Calvin argues extensively that infants of believers are participants of the covenant. He bases his argument for infant baptism squarely on God's covenant and circumcision. To give a somewhat lengthy quote:

And let no one object against me that the Lord did not command that his covenant be confirmed by any other symbol than circumcision, which has long since been abolished. There is a ready answer that for the time of the Old Testament he instituted circumcision to confirm his covenant, but that after circumcision was abolished, the same reason for confirming his covenant (which we have in common with the Jews) still holds good. Consequently, we must always diligently consider what is common to both, and what they have apart from us. The covenant is common and the reason for confirming it is common. Only the manner of confirmation is different—what was circumcision for them was replaced for us by baptism.<sup>11</sup>

However, when Calvin is pressed by the opposition, he goes beyond this and appears to indicate that God may sanctify in the womb. Calvin does not want to make this into a general rule, but he mentions the example of John the Baptist, who was filled with the Holy Spirit when he was not yet born (Luke 1:15).<sup>12</sup> Later in the same debate, Calvin says that God has used another way in calling many, giving them true knowledge of himself by inward means, that is by the illumination of the Spirit apart from the medium of preaching.<sup>13</sup> Calvin does not mean to say that they would have the same knowledge of faith, but he does not want to deny that infants, and even unborn babies, may have faith.<sup>14</sup>

These quotes have played a role in the struggle of the Liberation,

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<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 4.16.6 (2.1329).

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.17 (2.1340).

<sup>13</sup> See also this statement: "Therefore, if it please him, why may the Lord not shine with a tiny spark at the present time on those whom he will illumine in the future with the full splendor of light—especially if he has not removed their ignorance before taking them from the prison of the flesh?" *Institutes*, 4.26.19 (2.1342).

<sup>14</sup> See on this, H. Kakes, *De doop in de Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften* (Kampen: Kok, 1953) 112–113; and R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacraments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 196–197. J. Van Genderen is critical of this aspect of Calvin's defense of infant baptism; see his article "De doop bij Calvin," in *Rondom de doopvont* (ed. W. van 't Spijker et al.; Goudriaan: De Groot, 1983) 288ff.

when presumed regeneration was made to form the basis for infant baptism. This doctrine of presumed regeneration cannot be found in Calvin. However, he did consider it possible for God to bring about faith and repentance in infants before they were baptized and even before they were born. He attributed this to a particular work of the Spirit. The question arises as to whether the Form for Baptism refers to such a special work of the Holy Spirit in infants. In the next instalment, we hope to have a look at the views of Ursinus and then answer this question.

## Part 2

### Ursinus

Ursinus continued in the direction set out by Calvin. He maintained that children born of those who believe are included in the covenant and in the church of God unless they exclude themselves. They are, therefore, also disciples. The Holy Spirit teaches them in a manner adapted to their capacity and age.<sup>15</sup>

Ursinus elaborated on the fact that the benefits of remission of sins and regeneration belong to the children, for this is the language of the covenant. This is supported with references to Scripture such as: “to be your God and the God of your descendants after you” (Gen. 17:7, to which are added: Matt. 19:14; Acts 2:39; 3:25; 1 Cor. 7:14; Rom. 11:16). Ursinus concluded that baptism ought to be administered to infants of believers as well

for they are holy, the promise is unto them, the Kingdom of heaven is theirs; and God, who is certainly not the God of the wicked, declares that he will also be their God.<sup>16</sup>

That is the covenantal argument. Ursinus, however, added a second line of defense. He, too, appears to imply that infants of believers have the Holy Spirit. He defended that infants are disciples since they are born within the church and are taught in a manner suited for them. He pointed not only to Acts 2:39, but also to Acts 10:47: “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Z. Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (trans. G. W. Williard; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 366.

<sup>16</sup> Ursinus, *Commentary*, 367.

<sup>17</sup> Ursinus, *Commentary*, 368.

Ursinus clarified his position at a later point in his explanation, where he confronted the Anabaptist objection based on Mark 16:16 that only believers can be baptized. He argued that infants may have the Holy Spirit and can be regenerated by him. Two texts are adduced to defend that infants can be regenerated: John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15), and Jeremiah is called sanctified before he was born (Jer. 1:5). This is applied to the infants of believers. "If infants now have the Holy Ghost, he certainly works in them regeneration, good inclinations, new desires, and such other things as are necessary for their salvation." This statement is surprising, for it is too general. Ursinus, too, knew that not all baptized children are regenerated. Therefore he added: "Or at least, he supplies them with everything that is requisite for their baptism."<sup>18</sup> He is referring to the Holy Spirit, who works regeneration.<sup>19</sup>

We can notice a shift in argumentation. Calvin emphasized the covenant as basis for infant baptism. Marginally, he added that the Holy Spirit may even have begun working faith and regeneration in children in the womb, without making this an argument for infant baptism. For Ursinus, it is clear that even infants can have the Holy Spirit to regenerate them. He used this as a valuable support for infant baptism.

### Scriptural Basis

The question must be considered whether this defense of infant baptism is correct. Does Scripture teach that the Holy Spirit dwells in infants to regenerate them? There are several problems attached to this position. First of all, it is striking that the proof texts given for this opinion come from the wrong period, so to speak. The promise of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers is a promise with a date attached to it. It did not occur in the Old Testament, for Joel prophesied: "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy..." (Joel 2:28). According to the apostle Peter, this prophesy was fulfilled on the day of

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<sup>18</sup> Ursinus, *Commentary*, 370. Ursinus added a reference to Peter's word in Acts 10:47: "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." It must be remarked, however, that this text cannot support infant faith. The reference is to speaking in tongues and praising God, something that does not take place prior to infant baptism.

<sup>19</sup> Kakes argues that Ursinus accepted the possibility of infant faith, but that for him this was not a basis for infant baptism, for the real basis for baptism was regeneration and the gift of the Holy Spirit; see his *De doop in de Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 114.

Pentecost, after Jesus Christ's ascension. From that time onward, the Holy Spirit comes on those who believe in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38).<sup>20</sup> The texts used to prove the indwelling of the Holy Spirit date from an earlier period in God's salvation work. The text from Jeremiah speaks about the Old Testament dispensation, and the text about John the Baptist precedes Pentecost by more than thirty years. They lived in a different period when different rules applied.<sup>21</sup>

Let us also look at the two specific texts that were mentioned in support. Concerning John the Baptist, the angel said to his mother Elizabeth that her son would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. This is obviously not a general statement that can be applied to many children of believing parents, but a specific statement about one particular child, John. Moreover, it is not obvious that this refers to regeneration in general. Actually, Calvin himself, in his commentary on this passage, goes in a different direction when he remarks that "the greatness and excellence of his [John's] office are extolled."<sup>22</sup>

That is, indeed, the intention of this statement. The word "great" (Luke 1:15) speaks of John's significance for the kingdom of God<sup>23</sup> and not about his personal regeneration. John will be inspired by the Holy Spirit to be a prophet,<sup>24</sup> and John's life proves that he was a prophet.

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<sup>20</sup> This explains the special fillings with the Spirit as recorded in Acts; they are the result of faith in Jesus Christ. See N. H. Gootjes, "De doop met de Heilige Geest," 154ff.

<sup>21</sup> See also C. Trimp, *Woord, water en wijn* (Kampen: Kok, 1985) 58–59.

<sup>22</sup> J. Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Gospels* (3 vols.; trans. J. Pringle; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 1.17–18. Calvin acknowledges that the plentiful influence of the Spirit in John was an extraordinary gift of God. At the end, however, Calvin makes this general: "Let us learn by this example that, from the earliest infancy to the latest old age, the operation of the Spirit in men is free."

<sup>23</sup> So S. Greijdanus, *Het heilig evangelie naar de beschrijving van Lucas* (2 vols.; Kommentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Amsterdam: Bottenburg, 1940) 1.30.

<sup>24</sup> H. A. W. Meyer, *The Gospel of Luke* (trans. R. E. Wallis; Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, 1980) 236; and A. Plummer, *The Gospel according to S. Luke* (5th ed.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1922) 14. Both identify this function as the Nazirite, but Greijdanus agrees with Lagrange that John's position was different; see his *Lucas*, 1.30–31. It includes at any rate the prophetic office. Luke 1:15 appears to mean that his work as a prophet began in the womb and that his leaping in the womb is his first prophecy. See Meyer, *The Gospel of Luke*, 236; Greijdanus, *Lucas*, 1.31; and J. van Bruggen, *Lucas* (2nd ed.; Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1996) 38.

The other text mentioned in support of infant regeneration is Jeremiah 1:5, where God says to Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart.” The Holy Spirit is not explicitly mentioned in this text, but it speaks of consecration, or holiness. What kind of holiness is meant? A traditional opinion says that this holiness has to do with removal of (original) sin—it can be found in the church fathers.<sup>25</sup> In his *Institutes*, Calvin appears to follow this. But the same Calvin correctly emphasizes Jeremiah’s prophetic office in his commentary.<sup>26</sup> The text speaks of setting apart and consecrating for a special office.<sup>27</sup> Jeremiah is prepared for his office as a prophet.<sup>28</sup>

We must conclude that there is no scriptural basis for the position, tentatively held by Calvin and more forcefully by Ursinus, that a special work of sanctification by the Holy Spirit could serve as a basis for infant baptism. The two examples of Jeremiah and John the Baptist do not speak of regeneration and renewal.

### The Promise at Baptism

This brings us back to the Form for Baptism. Was such a special activity of the Spirit in infants taught in the Form for Baptism when it mentioned the promise of the Holy Spirit?

The answer is no. There is not a trace in the Form for Baptism of the speculation found among sixteenth-century Reformed theologians that the Holy Spirit works regeneration in babies before or just after birth. It does not support infant baptism with this view that appeared marginally in sixteenth-century theology. Rather, the Form bases itself squarely on the main argument from Scripture: the covenant. This term occurs prominently in

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<sup>25</sup> B. N. Wambacq, *Jeremias* (De Boeken van het Oude Testament; Roermond en Maaseik: Romen, 1957) 28.

<sup>26</sup> J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations* (ed. and trans. J. Owen; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 1.35–36.

<sup>27</sup> C. F. Keil, *Jeremiah* (trans. D. Patrick; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 39–40. That is the reason why the verb is no longer translated as “made holy” but as “consecrated” (RSV, NRSV, NASB) and as “set apart” (NIV). These translations prevent misunderstandings as found in Calvin.

<sup>28</sup> See the commentaries on Jeremiah by A. Van Selms, *Jeremia en Klaagliederen* (3 vols.; De Prediking van het Oude Testament; Callenbach: Nijkerk, 1972–74) 1.5; J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 145; and B. J. Oosterhoff, *Jeremia* (2 vols.; Commentaar op het Oude Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1990) 1.90.

the Form:

- God the Father testifies and seals to us that he establishes an eternal covenant of grace with us.
- Since every covenant contains two parts, a promise and an obligation...
- We must not despair of God's mercy nor continue in sin, for baptism is a seal and trustworthy testimony that we have an eternal covenant with God.
- The Lord spoke to Abraham, the father of all believers, and thus also speaks to us and our children, saying, "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you..." (Gen. 17:7).
- Infants must be baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God and of his covenant.
- You have heard that baptism is an ordinance of the Lord our God to seal to us and our children his covenant.

Infant baptism is based not on the possibility that the Spirit may have regenerated the infant before he or she is baptized, but on the reality of the covenant. According to God's institution, infants of believers belong to the covenant. Therefore they must be baptized.

That brings us back to the question raised at the beginning regarding the promise at baptism, in particular the promise of the Holy Spirit. How should we explain the statement that the Spirit "assures us...that he will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ, imparting to us what we have in Christ, namely, the cleansing from our sins and the daily renewal of our lives"? The answer is simple. The Form does not state that the Spirit actually dwells in all baptized children. It does not speak of an existing situation. Rather, this is presented as a promise for the covenant people of God.

That is in complete agreement with Scripture. The promise of indwelling is first mentioned in Acts 2:39: "The promise is for you and your children..." It is conditional on repentance and faith: "Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven" (Acts 2:38). It is also mentioned in Romans 8:9–11; there, too, it is conditional on faith.<sup>29</sup> When the Form for Baptism speaks of the indwelling

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<sup>29</sup> Mark the use of "if" in v. 9: "You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you." This "if" is not inserted to make the Roman believers doubt whether they have the Spirit; see the end of vv. 12, 15–16. But it does tie the indwelling of the Spirit to the belief in Jesus

and sanctifying work of the Spirit, it speaks of promises. These are great gifts of the covenant offered by God and grasped with the hands of faith.

The same promissory character can be seen in the way the Form speaks about the meaning of being baptized into the name of the Father and of the Son. The promise that “He will provide us with all good and avert all evil or turn it to our benefit” is fulfilled in those who believe (Rom. 8:28 speaks of “those who love him”). And the covenant promise of the Son is the forgiveness of sins, and is fulfilled through our union with him, as Romans 6:5 says: “If we have been united with him like this in his death....”

The Form for Baptism follows Scripture in presenting the statement about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as promises. In baptism, our Triune God promises himself and all his benefits to us. These are splendid gifts, granted by God and accepted in faith.

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Christ; see v. 9b: “And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.” See the commentaries of J. Calvin, *Romans* (trans. J. Owen; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 290; S. Greijdanus, *De brief van den apostle Paulus aan de gemeente te Rome* (2 vols.; *Kommentaar op het Nieuwe Testament*; Amsterdam: Botenburger, 1933) 1.363; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; *International Critical Commentary*; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975–1979) 1.387–388; J. D. G. Dunn disagrees, *Romans 1–8* (*Word Biblical Commentary*; Dallas: Word Books, 1988) 444, but that is caused by his view on the baptism with the Holy Spirit.