BAPTISMAL EFFICACY AND THE REFORMED TRADITION: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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OUR REFORMED HERITAGE

When a Reformed Christian hears "baptismal regeneration," what comes to mind? "Heresy," most likely. Unfortunately, many in the Reformed community today have lost touch with some important aspects of their own heritage. If Reformed theology is going to continue reforming according to Scripture, we must recover the forgotten richness of the classic Reformed understanding of baptism. Today, baptism is often treated as a sign of personal commitment to the Lord, or a mere picture of spiritual blessings that are received apart from tangible means of grace. Infant baptism, on this view, accomplishes nothing of real significance and is merely a "wet dedication" service. But this is not the way Reformed Christians have always understood baptism.

The earliest Reformers held a robust view of baptismal efficacy. A whirlwind tour of sixteenth and seventeenth century writings reveals how far we have moved away from the faith of our fathers [1]. In Calvin's Strasbourg catechism, he asks the student "How do you *know* yourself to be a son of God in fact as well as in name?" The answer is "*Because I am baptized* in the name of God the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." In his Geneva catechism, he asks, "Is baptism nothing more than a *mere symbol* [i.e., picture] of cleansing?" The answer: "I think it to be such a symbol that *the reality is attached to it*. For God does not disappoint us when he promises us his gifts. Hence, *both pardon of sins and newness of life are certainly offered and received by us in baptism*." Early on in his discussion of baptism in the *Institutes*, Calvin claims, "We must realize that *at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life*. Therefore, as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins." Essentially, Calvin could say, "You know you are renewed and forgiven because you have been baptized." Elsewhere, Calvin wrote, "It is a thing out of all controversy true, that we put on Christ in baptism, and were baptized on this very ground, that we should be one with him" [2]. Martin Bucer, Calvin's mentor, wrote the following in his 1537 liturgy for infant baptism: "Almighty God, heavenly Father, we give you eternal praise and thanks, that you have granted and bestowed upon this child your fellowship, *that you have born him again to yourself through holy baptism*, that he has been incorporated into your beloved son, our only savior, and is now your child and heir…" This prayer was to be offered immediately following the child's baptism and clearly expresses the conviction that God has acted powerfully and savingly in the watery rite. In a similar vein, the French Reformed liturgy included the pastor speaking these words to the newly baptized infant: "Little child, *for you* Jesus Christ has come, he has fought, he has suffered. *For you* he entered into the shadows of Gethsemane and the terror of Calvary; *for you* he uttered the cry 'it is finished.' *For you* he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, and there *for you* he intercedes. *For you*, even though you do not yet know it, little child, but in this way the Word of the Gospel is made true, 'We love him because he first loved us.'"

Moving to the British Isles, Nicholas Ridley, an English reformer martyred by Roman Catholics for his Protestant faith, concluded, "Water in baptism is sacramentally changed into the fountain of regeneration." Consider also Thomas Cranmer's prayers in the *Book of Common Prayer* to accompany the baptism of an infant: "Grant that this child now to be baptized, may receive the fullness of thy grace and *ever remain in the number of thy faithful and elect children through Jesus Christ our Lord* [3]….[Then, following the baptism:] *Seeing now, dearly beloved, that this child is regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ's church*, let us give thanks unto God Almighty for these benefits, and with one accord make our prayers unto him, that this child may lead the rest of his life according to this beginning…We yield hearty thanks, most merciful Father, that it has pleased thee to *regenerate this infant with thy Holy Spirit, to receive him as thine own child by adoption, and to incorporate him into thy holy church*…" Finally, the Reformed Anglican genius, Richard Hooker: "Baptism both declares

and makes us Christians." "In baptism, besides the hand seen that casts the water, is the virtue of the Holy Ghost there, working, without hands, what here was wrought." In other words, God is not a fellow spectator at the baptismal ceremony, but the chief actor [4].

Reformed Confessional documents echo and crystallize the sentiments of the liturgical and private writings of Reformed theologians. The Second Helvetic Confession teaches that God promises to give us Christ in the sacraments: "But the principal thing that God promises in all the sacraments and to which all the godly in all ages direct their attention (some call it the substance and matter of the sacraments) is Christ the Savior…by whom all the elect are circumcised without hands through the Holy Spirit, and are washed from all their sins." Concerning baptism, the Confession teaches, "Now to be baptized in the name of Christ is to be enrolled, entered, and received into the covenant and family, and so into the inheritance of the sons of God,…to be cleansed also from the filthiness of sins, and to be granted the manifold grace of God, in order to lead a new and innocent life…All these things are insured by baptism. For inwardly we are regenerated, purified, and renewed by God through the Holy Spirit; and outwardly we receive the assurance of the greatest gifts in the water, by which also those great benefits are represented, and, as it were, set before our eyes to be beheld." The point is clear: to be baptized is to be cleansed and regenerated. The 1560 Scots Confession of John Knox is equally forthright: "And so we utterly condemn the vanity of those who affirm the sacraments to be nothing else than naked and bare signs. No, we assuredly believe that *by baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus*, to be made partakers of his righteousness, by which our sins are covered and remitted." The meaning is plain: In baptism, God unites us to Christ so that what is true of him is now true of us. The French Confession makes the same point: "We acknowledge only two sacraments, common to the whole church, the former whereof is baptism, given unto us to witness to our adoption, for *by it we are grafted into the body of Christ*, that being washed with his blood we might be renewed by his Spirit unto holiness of life…*[I]n baptism, God gives us really and in fact that which he there sets before us*; and that consequently *with these signs is given true possession and enjoyment of that which they present to us*."

Turning to the Westminster Standards, we find this train of thought continued. The Standards teach that the sacraments "confer" grace (WCF 27.3, 28.6), that they are "effectual means of salvation" (WSC 91), and that they are required if we are to (ordinarily) escape God's wrath and curse due to us for sin (WSC 85) [5]. Puritan expert David F. Wright [6] summarizes: "What then about the efficacy of baptism according to the Westminster Confession? Its *central affirmation* seems clear: 'the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost' (28.6). It is true that a variety of qualifications to this assertion are entered…But these qualifications serve in fact only to highlight the clarity of the core declaration, which is set forth as follows in the preceding chapter on sacraments in general…*The Westminster divines viewed baptism as the instrument and occasion of regeneration by the Spirit, of the remission of sins, of ingrafting into Christ* (cf. 28.1). *The Confession teaches baptismal regeneration*" [7]. Most Presbyterians today focus on the qualifiers on baptismal efficacy in the Confession, rather than its central affirmation. Indeed, the qualifiers are often treated as negating its plain statements. While it would be going too far to say the Confession necessitates belief in baptismal regeneration, there can be no question such a view of baptismal efficacy is included in its parameters, if determined by original authorial intent [8].

Further evidence the Westminster divines did not intend to rule all form(s) of baptismal regeneration and justification out of court is found when we consult the writings of the men themselves. Brooks Hollifield's fine work *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570-1720* shows there was quite a bit of diversity among seventeenth century England and New England Puritans on sacramental issues. But among the various positions of baptismal efficacy floating around, at least two noteworthy theologians held to forms of baptismal regeneration/justification. Both were chosen to participate in the Westminster Assembly and both had excellent Reformed pedigrees, though they arrived at their views independently of one another. Cornelius Burges' 1629 work, *The Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants*, argues forcefully that elect infants receive, at baptism, initial regeneration and remission of sin. This "first principle" of spiritual life then matures and develops as the child does [9]. Samuel Ward "proposed that baptism regenerated infants" and argued "all infants were, without doubt, justified through baptism" [1o]. However, Ward went on to say the grace received in baptism was only provisional and did not guarantee eternal salvation. Those baptized in infancy who fail to persevere in faith lose these benefits

and never enter into a full state of regeneration and justification. For Ward, these cases of apostasy were usually due to the child lacking "either careful, faithful parents or a proper minister, or both" [11].

This survey is by no means comprehensive. Indeed, we have just scratched the surface. It is true that many of the quotations given above are qualified or nuanced in various ways. These qualifiers are necessary to prevent misunderstanding [12]. But the core affirmations remain unchallengeable. The Reformed tradition, in its pristine form, linked baptism instrumentally to regeneration and justification, and thus, to the beginnings of salvation.

As Protestant scholasticism arose, especially in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, there was increasing pressure to play off sovereign grace against sacramentally mediated grace [13]. Reformed theology had to be "systematized," and sacramental theology found an increasingly awkward place among the theological loci. Indeed, B. B. Warfield, a nineteenth century Reformed giant, claimed the Reformation was a battle between Augustine's high ecclesiology (territory claimed by Rome) and his predestinarian soteriology (ground held by Protestants). But a close of reading of Calvin and other magisterial Reformers shows they wanted to be faithful to the whole Augustinian project [14]. In fact, Calvin mines Augustine heavily on the topics of election and sacraments. So, to the classic Reformed mind, the question, "Does God save or does baptism save?" poses a false dilemma. God saves *through* baptism; it is one of his instruments of salvation, along with the Word and the Eucharist [15]. Why are we so afraid of saying that God uses means to save us? And why is there such prejudice against the sacraments as means of (saving) grace? Sure, baptism is a sign. But preaching is just words — verbal signs. If God can effect salvation through verbal signs, why not sacramental signs as well? Or why not both together, as the Bible appears to teach? [16] It seems a Gnostic tendency has become deeply embedded in American Calvinism [17]. We want God's real saving work to be immediate, that is, apart from means or signs. But this is just another attempt to dephysicalize Christianity and we must fight it [18]. God works salvation through humble, material means: a paper and ink book, sound vibrations emanating from a preacher's voice, and simple water, bread, and wine. This is the scandal of the Christian faith! But we should revel in it, not deny it.

THE BIBLICAL WITNESS

Obviously, for Reformed Christians, the ultimate test of any doctrine is its fidelity to the whole counsel of God, revealed in the pages of Scripture. What does the Bible actually teach about the efficacy of baptism? While we cannot take the time and space here to do a thorough exegesis of all the references to baptism in the New Testament (much less the Old Testament), we can point to the face value meaning of several key passages. (Please read the passages listed below carefully!) In baptism,

- We are united (or married) to the crucified, buried, and risen Christ (Rom. 6:1ff), though we can be cut off (or divorced) from him if we are unfaithful (Rom. 11:17ff; cf. Jn. 15:1ff)
- We are forgiven (Acts 2:38, 22:16; cf. the Nicene Creed)
- We receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38)
- We are cleansed (Eph. 5:26)
- We are regenerated and renewed (Titus 3:5)
- We are buried and resurrected with Christ (Col. 2:11-12)
- We are circumcised in heart (Col. 2:11-12)
- We are joined to the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13)
- We are clothed with Christ (Gal. 3:27)
- We are justified and sanctified (1 Cor. 6:11) [19]
- We are saved (1 Pt. 3:20-21) [20]
- We are ordained as priests with access to the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 10:19-22) [21]

Of course, the ultimate proof of baptism's efficacy rests in the baptism of Jesus himself. Here, we have the ultimate paradigm for understanding God's work in baptism [22]. Jesus received the Spirit in fullness at his baptism, and was declared to be the beloved Son of the Father. With appropriate

qualifications, this is what God does in our baptisms as well: He pours out his Spirit upon us and declares us to be his dearly loved children [23].

In context, none of these passages teach baptism automatically guarantees salvation. But they do teach that God does a great work in baptism, a work that may be considered the beginnings of salvation for those God has elected to persevere to the end [24].

Some Reformed theologians will argue that the passages we have looked at are not references to water baptism at all, but to an unmediated 'spiritual' baptism that takes place apart from any outward rite or ceremony. But, in my opinion, this is special pleading. The Bible says there is *one* baptism (Eph. 4:5), so splitting baptism up into a physical baptism and a spiritual baptism is illegitimate [25]. Moreover, virtually all the texts we have cited above show up in the prooftexts for the Westminster Standards as references to water baptism. While the prooftexts do not have authority, they do give us an idea of how the divines were reading these baptismal passages.

Another escape route some Reformed theologians seek to take, in their flight from sacramental efficacy, is to claim these rituals are mere pictures [26]. In his commentary on the Westminster Shorter Catechism, G. I. Williamson writes, "The sacraments, then, are *signs* and *seals*. To understand this is to understand the sacraments' essential nature. But what is a sign? It is, in simplest terms, a picture, or symbol" [27]. It is standard fare in Reformed systematic and confessional theology to describe baptism as a sign. While the Scriptures nowhere explicitly call baptism a sign, circumcision is called a sign, and by covenantal transfer, this language is appropriately applied to baptism (Gen. 17:11, Col. 2:11ff).

But what is meant when baptism is called a sign? Williamson claims that baptism is a sign in the sense that it "pictures" something. In popular Reformed sacramental theology, this model is used to evacuate the sacraments of their efficacy. Nothing actually happens when someone is baptized because, after all, it is "just a picture." Presumably, God does his real work of grace apart from the sacrament of baptism. Thus, whenever the Scriptures read, "Baptism does x", we conveniently read it as, "Baptism pictures/symbolizes x." But this notion of "sign" = "picture" needs to be challenged, along with the denigration of baptismal efficacy that it entails. Baptism does not merely *picture* something, it *accomplishes* something. If God intended for baptism to be a picture, he seemed to make a poor choice of rituals. The outward rite simply does not picture what baptism is said to do [28]. Consider some test cases, drawn from the NT's declarations about baptism that we have already made reference to above:

- In Gal. 3:27, Paul claims, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Baptism is an investiture ceremony. This imagery for baptism is probably drawn from the OT priestly ordination ceremony, which involved a washing with water and a clothing rite (Lev. 8). Paul sees this Old Covenant ritual transformed into New Covenant baptism [29]. But it is hard to see how putting water on someone's head "pictures" clothing with the priestly garment of Christ.
- In Titus 3:5, Paul calls baptism "the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." Baptism is the sacrament of the new birth. But it will not do to say that baptism "pictures" this new birth. I have had the joy of watching my wife give birth three times now, but never in the delivery room did I witness anything that looked remotely like a baptism. In no obvious way does baptism picture regeneration.
- In Romans 6:1ff, Paul says we were united to Christ when we were baptized. Baptism is a kind of wedding ceremony, joining the one baptized to Christ in a covenantal relationship. But, again, the rite itself looks nothing like the covenant-making ceremony that it is said to be.
- In 1 Cor. 12:13, Paul says, "by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body," namely, the body of Christ. But once again the rite itself fails to picture incorporation into Christ's body. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how any ritual could picture such incorporation.
- In 1 Peter 3, Peter declares that God saves us through baptism. Baptism is "not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience towards God." In other words baptism is precisely not what it looks like! It may look like the outward washing of the body, but Peter says in reality, it is the washing of the conscience before God (cf. Acts 2:38, 22:16).

> In fact, if God intended baptism to simply picture this cleansing of conscience, it seems drinking water, rather than having it poured on the body, might have been a better choice of rites, since it is internal cleansing that is effected.

I conclude from this evidence that if it is indeed legitimate to call baptism a sign, we should not think that "sign" = "picture" as Williamson claims. There may be a grain of truth in this view (i.e., the pouring of water could picture the pouring out of the Holy Spirit or the washing of forgiveness), but at most, the pictorial/symbolic function of baptism is very minimal. Indeed, this is why it is so important to keep baptism and the Word together: someone could never figure out what God is doing in baptism just by looking at the rite. The Word must accompany the sacramental action to explain what is happening.

What then do we mean when we call baptism a sign? The Bible nowhere defines the term sign, though the gospel of John comes close. In John, Jesus' miracles are called signs. These are not mere pictures of God's saving grace, but powerful, transforming actions of God. Through these signs, the new creation is brought into being. We could possibly develop a biblical theology of signs from John's gospel that would then feed into our sacramental theology. Such an exercise might prove quite fruitful.

But, following Richard Flinn, Peter Leithart, and several other scholars, I propose looking at the meaning of "sign" in a different light. The study of signs (called semiotics) has shown that humans use verbal signs not merely to *describe* the world, but to *change* the world. Words are used not only passively, but actively. These "performative speech acts" include a judge's "Guilty!," a minister's "I now declare you husband and wife," and so forth. When language of this sort is used, a person's status is transformed. One minute a man is still considered innocent before the court of law. But then the judge bangs down his gavel and pronounces the sentence. From that time on, his standing has changed. One minute a man is still a bachelor. But then the minister utters a sentence and suddenly he finds himself covenantally bound to a woman in marriage, with all the attendant duties and privileges [30].

I suggest sacramental signs can be helpfully understood in the light of this semiotic understanding of speech acts. In fact, this analogy between the sacramental acts of God and speech acts has a long history, going back at least to Augustine, who called the sacraments, "God's visible words." Speech acts and ritual acts are not radically different. Rather, they are on a continuum.

To illustrate, consider what happens when a baptized person apostatizes (what we might call the "negative" efficacy of baptism). John Murray helpfully distinguished between the *intended* effect and the *actual* effect of a sacrament. God's intention in baptism is always blessing. But an unfaithful response on the part of the recipient will make the *actual* effect intensified curse. J. L. Austin, a linguistic philosopher, suggested that in analyzing speech acts, we must distinguish between illocution and perlocution. Flinn explains: "In any meaningful communication or action there is an effect intended by the actor; there is also an actual effect which may be different. For example, if I ask, 'Do you think the banks will collapse tomorrow?' the illocution may well be to acquire otherwise innocent information. But it may have the effect of creating panic in my hearers' ears" [31]. The illocution of baptism is blessing, but for covenant breakers, the perlocution is magnified judgment [32].

So, Williamson is correct: baptism is a sign. But this doesn't empty baptism of its efficacy. Indeed, just the opposite. Baptism, along with other sign actions of God, is an effectual means of grace to believers. As we sing of the church, "she is his new creation by water and the Word." None of the NT baptismal texts we have surveyed even hint that the rite is simply an ineffectual picture or symbol, nor do they give the impression that the efficacy attributed to baptism may takes place before or after the administration of the rite itself. These would have to be presuppositions read into, not out of, the texts themselves. We are driven to conclude, therefore, that God gives what he promises in baptism, that, as Calvin says, "he effects and performs what he figures."

"BUT WAIT A MINUTE!"

At this point, some of my readers are probably ready to throw this paper down: "You can't be Reformed and believe in baptismal regeneration! That's Lutheran, or even Romish!" But patience is needed if we are to attain mutual understanding and like-mindedness. Part of the problem is the meaning of the term "regeneration," which has been anything but stable in the development of Reformed theology. The term has acquired a fixed and narrow meaning in modern Reformed scholasticism and its popularized twentieth century spin-offs, but it was not always so. In the Bible, the term "regeneration" is used only twice: In Mt. 19:28, to refer to the renewal of the whole cosmos, and in Titus 3:5, in reference to baptism(!) [33]. For Calvin and the early Reformers, "regeneration" usually referred to our total renewal in God's image, including conversion and growth in Christ-likeness [34]. In *Institutes* 3.3.1, Calvin wrote, "I interpret repentance as regeneration whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God….[T]his restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances." In the early seventeenth century, the Synod of Dordt whittled the meaning of the term down to conversion alone [35]. Soon after that, Reformed scholastics developed a full blown *ordo salutis*, distinguishing between the implantation of new life and the first manifestations of that life in faith and repentance, nominating only the former "regeneration." In this scheme, regeneration is often a secret, unmediated work of God, under-girding and producing conversion. Finally, some contemporary theologians have called for a return to something similar to the earlier, Calvinian meaning, though with a biblical-theological twist. Richard Gaffin argues that "in Paul, the notion of having been raised with Christ [which is usually treated as synonymous with regeneration] does *not* correspond more or less exactly to the dogmatic conception of regeneration…Paul writes expressly that believers have been raised up with Christ 'through faith'…Unlike the traditional *ordo salutis* Paul explicates the inception of the application of redemption without recourse to the terminology of regeneration…understood as 'a communication of a new principle of life'" [36]. The problems, then, should be obvious. Not only is there a bifurcation between the way "regeneration" is used in the Bible and dogmatic theology, but dogmaticians themselves have not agreed on the proper theological definition of this key term. So whether or not a given version of "baptismal regeneration" is valid depends largely on which theological vocabulary one has chosen to work with.

If regeneration is taken in the Protestant scholastic sense, "baptismal regeneration" is absurd, since it would mean that each and every person baptized was eternally elect and eternally saved. Obviously, the earlier Reformed theologians who spoke freely of "baptismal regeneration" did not have this kind of monstrosity in mind. Instead, their understanding of regeneration was something less specific, more open ended. Regeneration in this broader, generic (shall we say "covenantal"?) sense can be found in passages like Matthew 13:21-22 and Hebrews 6:7-8. In the Parable of the Sower, the stony ground hearer receives the seed and new life springs forth. Something living is there that was not before. But when crises come, that new life withers away. Similarly, Hebrews 6:7-8, in the context of issuing a warning against apostasy, speaks of the earth (a natural allusion to humans, in light of Gen. 2:7) drinking in rain (an obvious allusion to baptism) and producing a living plant. But the blessing of baptismal rain is in itself no guarantee of a good crop. The new life may bear great fruit, unto blessing, or thorns and thistles, unto cursing [37].

This, then, is the point: God blesses us in baptism with new life, though baptism itself does not guarantee perseverance. Thus, we must combine the waters of baptism with enduring faith (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-12). If not, the heavenly waters God has poured out upon us will drown us in a flood of judgment [38].

All this is to show that the debate over "baptismal regeneration" is not what it appears to be at first glance. Indeed, careful definition of terms is needed, lest we simply talk past each other. However, we must remember that our classical Protestant forebears were very much at home in the strong, efficacious biblical language. If red flags go up for us when we hear things like "God saved you in baptism" (cf. 1 Peter 3:20-21) or "God clothed you with Christ in baptism" (cf. Gal. 3:27), we need to rethink our baptismal theology and bring it more in line with the teaching of God's Word. At stake is our whole understanding of how God works salvation in the world.

CURRENT STATE OF THE QUESTION AND THE WAY FORWARD

While "baptismal regeneration" has largely been eclipsed in the Reformed world, there are signs that biblical and traditional formulations are being revived. For several decades Norman Shepherd, former seminary professor at Westminster in Philadelphia and CRC pastor, has argued for a covenantal form of baptismal regeneration. In his recent book, he writes, "Baptism is the moment when we see the transition from death to life and a person is saved…This covenant sign and seal marks his conversion and his entrance into the church as the body of Christ. From the perspective of the covenant, he is united to Christ when he is baptized…Baptism [also] marks the entrance into the kingdom of God and the beginning of life-long training as kingdom subjects. According to the Great Commission, conversion without baptism is an anomaly. A sinner is not really 'converted' until he is baptized…[Covenantally], Christians are those who have been baptized. Unbelievers are those who have not been baptized" [39]. Shepherd acknowledges that we do not have access to God's eternal decree and cannot read hearts, so we can never tell in an absolute sense who is elect and regenerate. These are secret things that belong to the Lord alone (cf. Dt. 29:29, 2 Tim. 2:19). Therefore, we must always evaluate people in terms what has been revealed, namely their covenant status [40]. But for Shepherd, this is not a matter of presuming or pretending. It is not an unfounded "judgment of charity." The covenant is not to be understood as a merely formal, external relation. Rather, it is a living bond of fellowship, in which God and his people are united together in ties of mutual love and faithfulness. The covenant, in short, is a saving (albeit conditional) relationship. "Joining the church," therefore, is not like joining some club or voluntary organization. The church is God's new creation, the new humanity formed in Christ. The covenant community is the sphere of Christ's presence and the Spirit's work, such that, to be "in the church" is to be "in Christ" and "in the Spirit" [41]. God's eternal decree of salvation comes to manifestation and fruition in the context of the church and her ordinances.

In the PCA, Preston Graham has published a small work entitled *A Baptism That Saves*, in which he puts forth a baptismal regeneration position very similar to that of Westminster divine Cornelius Burges. Graham argues baptism is efficacious unto salvation for the elect. Following the Westminster Confession, he claims redeeming grace is conferred through the instrumentality of baptism. He writes, "The seal of baptism both 'marks out' a person in the outward sense of entering him or her into the covenant community, while conferring upon the elect saving grace effected by the Holy Spirit unto regeneration…To put it plainly, it seems very difficult to construe Scripture to say anything less about baptism than that God is, in a very real sense, 'present' in baptism. He is present not merely to watch it, witness it, or even to receive praise from it, but also – and most especially – to transact his covenant…In short, God is, in a very special and real sense, effecting salvation through baptism to the elect, according to the Reformed sacramental framework. And as this will be applied to the proper recipients of baptism, we see no reason to believe that children are excluded from this promise of election, as they are entrusted by God into the covenant family." Graham carefully distinguishes his view of baptismal regeneration from Reformed Baptist sacramental theology, as well as the Roman Catholic position: "Therefore, where the Baptist doctrine denies the means of grace in baptism, the Roman Catholic doctrine denies the personal agent of grace in baptism. Where the Baptist sees nothing being effected by means of the elements in baptism properly administered, the Roman Catholics see the elements themselves effecting grace in baptism. The Reformed position carefully navigates between either extreme, affirming [that through baptism salvation is] conferred by the personal agent of grace, the Holy Spirit" [42].

More sophisticated accounts of baptismal regeneration are now being developed by the likes of Joel Garver [43] and Peter Leithart [44] both within the PCA. Utilizing insights from narrative theology, semiotics, ritual theory, and theological sociology [45], these scholars have begun the massive project of overhauling our biblical theology of baptism and its relationship to salvation. It is impossible to summarize in brief form the richness of Leithart's approach, but we shall let him sketch the trajectory on which he is moving in his own words: "Questions concerning the efficacy of baptism have long divided Christians. Many Protestants fear that talk of 'baptismal regeneration' imputes an almost magical power to water, while Catholics and Orthodox accuse Protestants of robbing baptism of any efficacy at all. In seeking to move beyond this impasse, social scientific categories are both helpful and harmful." Leithart shows these categories are harmful when the "social" is considered prior to and apart from the "religious" or "theological." When this is done, one's membership in the church may be conceived of in a merely "social" way, without touching one's deepest and most fundamental identity. Baptism might only skim the surface of one's personality, since it is an external, socially performed

rite. But, Leithart, following John Millbank, suggests "sociology" in its modern form is really an alternative, idolatrous theology that privatizes religion and thus is complicit in the anti-Christian secularizing of socio-cultural life [46]. Theology is the *true* sociology, and theology and sociology are always deeply interwoven. Again, Leithart: "Despite its surface plausibility, [the] distinction between the 'sociological' and 'theological' is erroneous…[because it is mistaken to assume language acts] and other social and cultural processes are secular realities, not permeated with religious significance…[A]n a-theological sociology cannot give an adequate account of any social process." When attempts to divorce sociology and theology are made, our concept of personhood — the deepest religious core of our being — is radically individualized and interiorized. As Leithart explains, the Cartesian notion that the "interior self" is "ontologically fundamental," and therefore, "untouchable by social roles and rituals" needs to be challenged with a "'narrative' conception of personal identity." In this setting, it is baptism that defines the "real you": "Baptism immerses a person in [the story of the church]. Identities are formed at the intersection of various narratives of which one is a part (of family, community, nation, and so on), so that when baptism embeds one's story in that of the church, his identity is objectively modified. To 'I am an American, or Scot, or Chinese' is added 'I am a member of the Christian church;' one's 'forefathers' now include not only Washington, Robert the Bruce, or Mao, but Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the story that once began, 'my father sailed to the Cape from Amsterdam,' now begins, 'my father was wandering a Aramaen.' At an individual level, identity is bound up with the events of one's life…Roles acquired and significant actions done become part of my 'record,' a story that marks my difference from others and traces the continuity of my life through time. Objectively, baptism makes me a member of Christ's body, and this becomes an episode in the story of who I am. Subjectively, the baptismal narrative into which I am submerged may break violently against the story that, before baptism, identified me, forcing what may be a painful revaluation of my past and producing a revised self-image."

In terms of this communally- and narratively-formed view of personhood, it becomes possible to "rehabilitate the notion that baptism imprints an 'indelible character.' Baptism irreversibly plants my story in the story of the church, for even if I renounce her, my renunciation is part of her history. As a facet of individual identity, baptism is equally permanent, for one is never unbaptized. A baptized man can renounce Christ, turn persecutor of the church, reject everything he once confessed, forget his baptism. Having once passed through the waters, however, his every action thereafter, including those that are wholly inconsistent with his baptismal identity, are actions of a baptized man. Forgetfulness of baptism is the culpable forgetfulness of the baptized. Even those who leave the Father's house are sons, however prodigally they may squander their inheritance in riotous living…A dissembling [church] member is not [merely] a 'social' Christian but a 'false son' or 'unfruitful branch,' and this is a theological fact with eternal consequences." While Paul would not have carried all this philosophical baggage, Leithart has provided the tools to make sense of the Apostle's baptism-based exhortations, such as Rom. 6:1ff. Paul is calling on the Romans to "be who they are," to live in accordance with the new identity, status, and relationships they have received in baptism [47]. Pierre Marcel once commented, "It is extremely distressing to see that in the Reformed church the great majority of Christians never refer back to their baptism." If Marcel is right, we are danger of forgetting the very essence of who we are [48]. This must be considered a tragic crisis of identity. Baptism defines who we are and how we are to live as nothing else can. Its message is clear: "God has saved you; now be loyal to him. God has united you to Christ; now be who you are."

Next, Leithart gives us a glimpse of what this re-packaging of baptismal efficacy means for the individual Christian and the church community: "'Baptismal regeneration' may thus be defined in terms of the new identity, tasks, relationships, and privileges that are conferred through the baptismal rite. To Catholics and Orthodox, this may at first blush seem an inadequate account of 'regeneration.' In addition to all these 'merely social' or 'merely psychological' transitions, they will want to insist, baptism also effects a 'spiritual' rebirth. Though I am using 'regeneration' in a different way than theology has historically employed the term, my argument is that to raise the objection of reductionism is to remain entrenched in questionable categories. (Protestant denials that baptism is efficacious, of course, assume the same framework; for Protestants, baptism cannot 'regenerate' precisely because its efficacy is limited to an external cultural dimension)…Thus this formulation of baptismal regeneration is not a thin soup of sociology but thick theological stew. Let me unpack that assertion. First, this formulation assumes a theological account of 'identity.' Baptism effects a transition, as Rowan Williams puts it, not only in the regard of men but 'in the gaze of God,' and this

makes us 'new creations' in the deepest possible sense. Identity, Williams suggests, is enmeshed with relations in community, but our most fundamental belonging is to the community of Adam or of Christ, and therefore our basic identity is not constituted by social or cultural factors, but by the transcendent 'regard of God upon us.' The baptized is no longer regarded as 'stranger' but born again as a 'son of the house'…[P]rying apart social and theological 'levels' is simply impossible…[Second], socio-theological consideration of the nature of the church leads to a similar conclusion. No group's existence is either temporally or logically prior to its common practices…The church as a recognizable human community exists only in the common confession of Christ by her members, obedience to the Word, liturgical practices, fellowship and mutual aid, and formal and informal procedures of correction and forgiveness. If the Spirit dwells in the church as church, he dwells in the people organized and constituted by these practices. Baptism is one of the practices without which the church does not exist. Initiation is thus not so much a doorway through which one passes into the house as the act by which one becomes part of the house; it is not a passage toward membership so much as the first act of membership, and therefore the first contact with the Spirit who circulates through the body (cf. Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 12:12-13). Baptism into membership in the community of Christ therefore also confers the *arrabon* of the Spirit, and in this sense too is a 'regenerating' ordinance. There can be no 'merely social' membership in this family." Leithart's reconstruction of baptism carries weighty ecclesiological implications. If Leithart is right, the American Protestant tendency to drive a wedge between the church and salvation, between ecclesiology and soteriology, is badly mistaken. Baptism is constitutive of personal and corporate Christian identity [49].

Finally, Leithart explains how his re-reformed view of baptism does not lead to presumption, but rather calls us to perseverance: "How is baptism connected to the eschatological 'not yet'? Baptism does not guarantee an eternal standing among the people of God, for the baptized may be removed from the house and cut off from the Table. Yet, baptism is not irrelevant to eternal salvation; though baptism 'by itself' does not guarantee a standing, baptism never is 'by itself' but always a step on a pathway. Perseverance to the end of the pathway, the mark of eschatologically saving faith, is, as Augustine insisted, a gift of grace, which, being grace, is gratuitously distributed as God pleases. Yet, this grace is distributed through means, so that what we bring under the heading of 'the grace of perseverance' are the concrete ways God holds close and brings nearer, baptism among them. Baptism holds us close by admitting us to the Table, where we feed on Christ in the Spirit; by putting us within hearing of his life-giving word; by joining us to people who encourage, exhort, and comfort. Through continual baptismal *anamnesis*, we stir ourselves to faithfulness in edifying the body and gratitude for the gift of Christ. In baptism, we are inducted into ministry in God's house, and continuing in that ministry is the way of salvation. Clothed in the crucified Christ, the baptized enters the path of suffering service and living sacrifice whose destination is a weighty and glorious house, the brightness of endless day" [50].

We have quoted extensively from Leithart because his work is so important and not (yet) easily accessible. Leithart is pointing out the direction Reformed theology needs to move in the future. His reuniting of sacrament, salvation, church, and a life of service-oriented obedience is thoroughly traditional and biblical, but also integrates the best in cutting edge scholarship. His account of baptismal efficacy is eminently satisfying, because it makes good sense of the biblical data and human experience. It assures us that God has made us new persons in baptism, and challenges us to live accordingly.

CONCLUSION

It is not surprising to find a wide variety of positions on baptismal efficacy in the Reformed church today. This is how it is always been, from the earliest days of the Protestant movement. What is different, it seems, is that the higher views of baptism are now more out of favor than ever. If we categorically reject "baptismal regeneration," it must be acknowledged that we have moved significantly away from some traditional Reformed formulations. This would be fine, provided we replaced them with equivalent ones. But we have failed to do this. We have drifted substantially away from the strong baptismal theology of the best theologians in our heritage, and have paid a dear price for it. Baptism has been watered down (pun intended) from a means of sovereign, saving grace, to a means of granting external privilege. We are fearful of making people presumptuous, so we shy away from comforting them with the certainty that God "saved them through the washing of regeneration"

(Titus 3:5). We spend more time talking about what God does not do in baptism than what he actually does. But we have failed to realize the dangers that lurk on the other end of the baptismal efficacy spectrum. We have stolen away a vital means of assurance [51] from God's people and turned this precious means of grace into a means of doubt. *But there is no reason to doubt*. "One of the most harmful notions ever foisted upon Reformed Christianity is this idea that God normally communicates his presence immediately to the soul of man, by-passing all outward, physical means. Yes,…the Lord is free to work outside of his constituted means in *extraordinary* cases. But this only means that the Lord *ordinarily works just as he has promised through his appointed instruments* to communicate his grace…[T]he Lord's ordinary, normal means of delivering his gifts is indeed *through* his constituted means and not beside them or around them or without them. This is God's normal *modus operandi*. The Lord's Spirit normally works through the human and physical instrumentalities that he has ordained! Otherwise, the promises that are attached to the means are misleading and deceptive…*To understand the Holy Spirit's promise to use the Lord's appointed means as instruments to deliver the gifts of the kingdom is the hallmark of Calvin's Reformed sacramental ecclesiology. Why do we not believe what God has promised? Why are we offended to think that God actually delivers on his promise in baptism?*" [52] The pastoral payoff of recovering a biblical, traditional view of baptismal efficacy for counseling, parenting, assuring, and so on, is tremendous.

The importance of baptism to one's identity as a child of God can never be overestimated. In baptism, we are enfolded into the family of God and begin our enculturation in the life of the eschatological kingdom. In baptism, God unites us to his Son and pours out his Spirit upon us. He weds us to Christ and ordains us to his royal priesthood. He forgives our sin and grants us new life. As the WSC teaches, baptism is not a mere picture, but an effectual means of redemption. This is not to say baptism in isolation guarantees salvation, but God never intended baptism to stand on its own. Rather, as we mix the waters of baptism with the obedience of faith and life in the church among the covenant people, we find that God has already given us and our children every blessing in Christ. Whitehead once said the whole history of philosophy was simply a footnote to Plato; I doubt that is right, but I do not doubt the whole Christian life may be considered a footnote to one's baptism. True, baptized persons can renounce their Father and become prodigals; they can reject Jesus as their husband and become adulterers. Baptism is an act with eternal consequences for the faithful and the unfaithful, and covenant members who renounce their baptismal identity and fall from grace can only expect God's harshest judgment (cf. Gal. 5:4; Heb. 10:26ff). But apostasy is never our expectation for the baptized. Baptism itself is blessing through and through; indeed, it is the gospel in liquid form.

So how should we then talk about baptism? This paper is not advocating use of terminology such as "baptismal regeneration" or "baptismal justification" (even though I have used it here and there, following our Reformed forefathers). Such language carries quite a bit of baggage due to its usage in other traditions, and without proper qualification and explanation, is bound to cause confusion [53]. But we do need to communicate that God works powerfully and savingly through his means of grace, including baptism. We do need to emphasize that baptism is a merciful work of God, and not so much a human act of devotion. We do need to reiterate, again and again, that through baptism, the Spirit incorporates us into the elect community, the church, which is the bride and body of Christ. We do need to teach that baptism is our initiation into the covenant of grace, and therefore grants privileges and imposes obligations. Most importantly, we need to confess our faith "in one baptism for the remission of sins" and in the gloriously gracious God who acts through the waters of baptism to bring us to himself.

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1. All emphasis in the following quotations is mine.

2. Critics will no doubt point to passages in Calvin that seem to contradict the clear statements I have quoted above. Most scholars recognize a deep tension in Calvin's baptismal theology. For an excellent discussion, see Edmund Schlink's *The Doctrine of Baptism*, especially 99ff. However, Schlink wrongly labels Calvin's view of baptismal efficacy as "parallel" rather than "instrumental" (e.g., God works *alongside of* rather than *through* the ordained means). I also have to disagree with Schlink's (Lutheran) assessment that the cognitive/assuring pole (baptism as sign or pledge) and the

efficacious/salvific pole (baptism as means or instrument) of Calvin's thought should be played off against each other. Rather I think they should be combined, so that baptism is considered as *both* a means of redemption and a sign of assurance. Schlink exaggerates the extent to which Calvin loosened the connection between baptism and God's saving action. Even Schlink is forced to admit, "[I]n spite of Calvin's one sided emphasis on the cognitive reference, not only the sign but also the signified grace, regeneration, dying, and rising with Christ are present…In any case, the church of the Lutheran Confessions did not regard Calvin's teaching on baptism [as] divisive as it did…his teaching on the Eucharist…The most profound difference [in baptismal theology] runs its course not between the Eastern Church and Augustine, nor between Thomas and Luther, not even between Luther and Calvin, but between all these on one side and Zwingli and the Baptists on the other. The most profound difference is…the understanding of baptism either as God's deed or as the deed of human obedience" (168-9). Calvin, with virtually the whole church catholic up to the Reformation, believed God was powerfully and savingly at work in the sacrament of baptism.

3. Ray Sutton (in *Signed, Sealed, and Delivered*) explains Cranmer's language, especially its Augustinian roots: "[This] is an important statement about the way election was understood. It implies a covenantal or sacramental view of election. Baptism is interpreted to mean an acknowledgement of a person as among the elect. In a visible sense, baptism and election are one; in an eternal sense they may not be the same. However, the prayer is for the person to remain among the elect. This is a prayer in the words of Augustine for 'predestination unto perseverance,' (as distinguished from 'predestination unto grace'). It also reflects that as long as one faithfully lives under the sign and seal of the covenant, baptism, he should be treated and counted as one of God's elect…Augustine distinguished between predestination to grace and predestination to perseverance. Based on the language of the NT, Augustine spoke of all who are baptized as having predestination unto grace but not necessarily predestination unto perseverance. For Augustine, everyone receives grace at baptism. It is grace in an incipient, organic sense, but not in a final completed sense. Augustine based his view of grace on the very language of the NT. Grace could be received in vain (2 Cor. 6:1), and one could fall from grace (Gal. 5:4). Grace is not static, it is dynamic…The church is only given to know election in terms of the sacraments, faith, and obedience…The Bible speaks about the possibility of falling from grace (Gal. 5:4), which means grace is to be understood in the context of an organic, living relationship with Christ. Grace is a relation, not a substance. It is the gift of Christ himself. It is not [static or impersonal]. Because grace is the formation of a relation, it is defectable. Just as a relation can be nurtured or negated by lack of attention, so a relation with God comes under the same possibilities. A relation with God can be cultivated and expanded, or it can be rejected and killed. [This is why] Scripture calls for persevering faith, the kind that builds upon a previously existing relation begun at baptism…The covenantal and organic position [described here] is different from the Arminian understanding of falling from grace…[In Arminianism], the sacraments were not understood as the sovereign, objective work of God, but as a witness to personal faith [i.e., to man's action rather than God's]."

4. The means of grace, Word and sacrament, should be understood as divine works, not merely human works. Take a marriage ceremony as an analogy: Jesus said that when a minister/officiant pronounces the couple to be husband and wife, it is really God who has joined them together (Mt. 19:6). If God acts effectually through a marriage ceremony, which is not a sacrament, how much more must he work through those ritual acts which *are* sacramental? Thus, when the "sacramental" Word is preached, it is really Christ himself who does the preaching (Eph. 2:17; cf. Rom. 10:14, which should read, "How shall they believe the one *whom* they have not heard?"). The words of John the Baptist about the baptism Jesus would give to his people (Mt. 3:11) were not true only for those who were gathered in the upper room at Pentecost in Acts 2. Every time baptism is administered in his name, he baptizes not merely with water as John did, but with the Spirit and fire. Baptism makes us sharers in what Jesus did to and for the church at Pentecost. See also 1 Cor. 12:13. Paul must have water baptism in view here since he says it is a baptism all the Corinthians received and he immediately links it with the other sacrament, the Lord's Supper. In water baptism, the Spirit incorporates the one baptized into the body of Christ.

5. Putting together WCF 25.2 and 28.1 yields the conclusion that there is (ordinarily) no salvation apart from baptism.

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7. "Baptism at the Westminster Assembly" in *Calvin Studies* 80. Emphasis mine.

8. Two more things about WCF 28 should be noted. First, section 5 indicates, "that not all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated." This leaves us with the freedom to regard all who are baptized as regenerate *until and unless they prove otherwise*. Isolated examples of apostasy should not be used to undercut the efficacy of baptism more generally. Second, section 6 states, "The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered." As Joel Garver has pointed out, it seems entirely legitimate to interpret this in light of earlier Reformed confessional documents. The point, then, would not be that one's baptism may not take effect until long after the time of administration; rather, the sense would be that baptism's efficacy, beginning at the moment of administration, extends through the whole of one's life. As the Belgic Confession states, "Neither does this Baptism only avail us at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but *also through the whole course of our life*." Likewise, the Scots Confession says, "For baptism once received *continues for all of life*, and is a *perpetual sealing of our adoption*." The French Confession teaches the same: "[A]lthough we are baptized only once, yet the gain that it symbolizes to us *reaches over our whole lives and to our death*, so that we have *a lasting witness that Jesus Christ will always be our justification and sanctification*." Finally, Cornelius Burges, in his fine seventeenth century work *The Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants*, opens with these words: "There is no ordinance set up by Christ in his church, more useful and comfortable unto a Christian, *throughout the whole course of his militant condition*, than sacred baptism, the laver of regeneration and of the renewing of the Holy Ghost." Later, he wrote, " I deny not future actual efficacy of baptism after the act of administration, but I only plead for some efficacy *when it is administered*" (112) and claimed Calvin for support of this view (cf. 159, 169).

9. Burges (with spelling modernized) writes, "Elect infants do ordinarily receive the Spirit in baptism, as the first efficient principle of future actual regeneration…It is most agreeable to the institution of Christ, that all elect infants that are baptized…do, ordinarily receive, from Christ, the Spirit in baptism, for their first solemn initiation into Christ, and for their future actual renovation, in God's good time, if they live to years of discretion, and enjoy the other ordinary means of grace appointed of God to this end." The initial/actual distinction is explained on pages 14ff in Burges' work. Burges argues his whole case thoroughly from Scripture, but perhaps the most interesting part of his work is chapters 5-8, in which he demonstrates that his position on baptismal regeneration is found in the church fathers, the Reformed Confessions, the writings of the Continental divines, such as Calvin, Bucer, Musculus, and Zanchius, and the writings of several British theologians. He distinguishes his position from the "physical/metaphysical efficacy" view of Rome on 330ff.

10. Hollifield, 82, 79.

11. Hollifield, 85. Besides Hollifield's work (sadly out of print), see Joel Garver's essay at http://www.lasalle.edu/~garver/wcf.htm for an excellent study of the Westminster Standards and summaries of the views of Burges and Ward.

12. For example, none of the statements quoted above teach that someone is *automatically* saved at baptism or that each and every person baptized is eternally saved. Indeed, I know of no theologian in the history of the church who has held such extreme views. Baptism is a true means of grace, but that grace is conditioned both by God's decree and our response of faithfulness. There is no superstitious attribution of magical power to the waters of baptism.

13. This is not to say the rise of Protestant scholasticism was bad, only that it was not an unmixed blessing.

14. Augustine, perhaps better than anyone in the history of the church, held together the sovereign nature of grace and the mediated nature of grace.

15. Again, all this indicates that baptism is chiefly a work of God, not man. Consider Calvin: "But as baptism is a solemn recognition by which God introduces his children into the possession of life [e.g., regeneration], a true and effectual sealing of the promise, a pledge of sacred union with Christ, it is justly said to be the entrance and reception into the church. And as the instruments of the Holy Spirit are not dead, God truly performs and effects by baptism what he figures." Elsewhere, Calvin wrote, "There is a union complementary with the thing figured, lest the sign be empty, because that which the Lord represents in sign he effects at the same time, and executes in us by the power of the Spirit…What indeed do we abrogate or take away from God when we teach that he acts through his instruments, indeed, he alone…God works…through the sacraments as instruments…The Spirit is the author, the sacrament is truly the instrument used." All these quotations (and much more of value) can be found in The Lord's Service by Jeff Meyers (133). Writing against Anabaptists, Calvin wrote, "We hold both the washing of regeneration and the spiritual nourishment of the body and blood of Christ are conferred through his hand just as if he were an angel come down from heaven" (quoted in *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals* by Willem Balke, 247). The means of grace are like the scalpel in a surgeon's hand. When the surgery is done, we praise the surgeon, not the tool he wields. Efficacious sacraments do not mean credit for salvation is divided between God and creaturely means.

16. Sinclair Ferguson, in his excellent book *The Holy Spiri*t, falls into just this trap (125). He has no problem taking biblical passages that speak of God's work of regeneration *through the Word* at face value (e.g., 1 Pt. 1:23, Jas. 1:18). But when he comes to similar passages that refer to baptism (e.g., Titus 3:5), he suddenly shifts ground and spiritualizes away the baptismal referent (195). When dealing with the preached Word, Ferguson preserves the efficacy of the means by distinguishing between the *efficient cause* of regeneration (the Holy Spirit) and the *instrumental cause* (the Word). But why not do the same with baptism? Ferguson's refreshing biblical theological approach to Scripture leads him to the edge of affirming an efficacious baptism, but then, inexplicably (apart from tradition-bound prejudices), he backs away, and remains entrenched in immediacy. For example, he continually refers to Ezek. 36 to prove the sovereignty of God's work of redemption in granting the Spirit and a new heart to his people, but continually overlooks how "wet" this chapter is (e.g., 36:25, 33; see pages 116, 122, etc.).

17. The roots of this shift are too complex for us to delve into here. However, there is no doubt the Great Awakenings radically changed the face of Protestantism in America. *Revivalism* eclipsed the *Reformation* as the fundamental paradigm for understanding how God works in the world. Today, even many Presbyterians and other paedobaptists are largely 'baptistic' in their presuppositions about the nature of New Covenant religion. See *Against the Protestant Gnostics* by Philip Lee and *The Failure of American Baptist Culture* edited by James Jordan.

18. See James Jordan, *Creation in Six Days*, ch. 4.

19. Many commentators read 1 Cor. 6:11 in this way: "But you received a justifying and sanctifying washing in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." "In the name of Jesus" echoes Luke's shorthand baptismal formula used in Acts and the grammar of the text suggests the Spirit instrumentally confers justification and sanctification through the washing.

20. Peter tells us baptism is not a mere outward washing ("not the removal of the filth of the flesh") but a cleansing before God ("the answer of a good [e.g., forgiven] conscience"). Interestingly, Peter also tells us "eight souls were saved through water" in Noah's ark. But this "salvation" was not necessarily permanent since it is evident from the Genesis narrative that at least one of the eight (Ham) apostatized (Gen. 9:18ff; cf. Jude 5). Thus, Peter's encouragement rooted in baptism need not lead to presumption; rather, it is calculated to drive his hearers to persevere in faithfulness.

21. For a complete argument that the washing in Heb. 10:22 is a reference to baptism, and fulfills Old Covenant priestly anointings, see *The Priesthood of the Plebs* by Peter Leithart.

22. Calvin argued that the "one baptism" of Eph. 4:5 referred ultimately to Jesus' own baptism and our participation in it. See *Institutes* 4.15.6: "Lastly, our faith receives from baptism the advantage of its sure testimony to us that we are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united

to Christ that we become sharers in all his blessings. For he dedicated and sanctified baptism in his own body [Mt. 3:13] in order that he might have it in common with us as the firmest bond of the union and fellowship which he has deigned to form in us. Hence, Paul proves that we are children of God from the fact that we put on Christ in baptism [Gal. 3:26-27]. Thus we see that the proper fulfillment of baptism is in Christ, whom also for this reason we call the proper object of baptism." This is why we are called *Christians*: We share in the christening (baptismal anointing) Jesus received in the Jordan.

23. Standing in the background of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan are all the baptisms of the Old Covenant. For example, the book of Hebrews calls the various Levitical washings (e.g., cleansing after defilement from touching a corpse; cleansing from leprosy; priestly ordination; etc.) "baptisms" (9:10). Various events, such as the flood (1 Pt. 3:21), Red Sea crossing (1 Cor. 10:1-12; cf. Rom. 6:2ff), kingly anointing (1 Sam. 10:1ff), and return from exile (Ezek. 36:24ff; Isa. 44:3-4) should be interpreted in baptismal categories. If we took the time to trace these connections out, in each case we would find that the baptismal ceremonies/events had an efficacy appropriate to their place in redemptive history. For example, the flood really did cleanse the world (cf. 2 Pt. 3:5-7), and Noah is presented as a new Adam when he leaves the ark (Gen. 9:1, 7, 20). The Red Sea crossing really did free Israel from the tyranny of Pharaoh. A Levitical baptism really did restore a former leper to participation in the cultic system of Israel. Aaron's ordination really granted him new standing and privileges before God and the people. Saul's anointing granted him the Spirit and kingly office, as well as making him a "new man" with a "new heart." In Ezekiel's prophecy of the new exodus, sprinkling with water is coordinated with being given a new heart. And so on. A complete biblical-theological account of baptismal efficacy would incorporate a full study of these Old Covenant rituals and occurrences and their typological significance. Unfortunately, such a study goes far beyond the scope of this paper.

24. If we may be permitted to return to our earlier discussion of the Westminster Confession on baptism, we should note that the divines stated not all receive the same degree of grace from baptism: Baptismal grace is conditioned "according to the counsel of God's own will" (WCF 28.6). However, we must never let our course of action be governed by guesses about God's secret election; the revealed will of God in Scripture must chart our course, including how we regard our fellow baptized covenant members. Unless we have good reason to doubt the regeneration of a baptized person, we should not do so. Covenant members are "innocent until proven guilty," so to speak.

25. Of course, I am not claiming this polemical point is the main thrust of Eph. 4:5, but it is one implication. Unfortunately, Sinclair Ferguson falls into this inner/outer (or spiritual/physical) baptism dichotomy in his book The Holy Spirit (195). The cases of Acts (e.g., 10:47) are not counter examples since they belong to a special, transitional period in redemptive history.

26. The following few pages are *heavily* indebted to Peter Leithart's work. One important piece can be found at http://new.hornes.org/theologia/content/cat_sacraments.htm.

27. *Commentary on the Shorter Catechism* 97.

28. For the sake of argument, I am assuming pouring/sprinkling is the preferred mode of baptism.

29. The writer of Hebrews makes the same connection in 10:19ff.

30. Of course, the ultimate speech act is the creation of the heavens and earth (Gen. 1). Our performative/creative speech acts are one way in which we image our Creator.

31. "Baptism, Redemptive History, and Eschatology," 129, in *The Failure of American Baptist Culture*.

32. Of course, ultimately, both the illocution and perlocution of the means of grace are under the sovereign rule of God. God foreordains covenant breaking, even though he is not the author of it. But we must insist that God's intention in baptism is always to bless, even as he sincerely offers salvation

to all who hear the gospel preached. Those who reject the means of grace will only have increased their punishment and have no one to blame but themselves.

33. Note that the Westminster divines used Titus 3:5 as a prooftext for their teaching on the benefits God signs, seals, and confers in water baptism. See also Saved By Grace by Anthony Hoekema (93ff) and *The Holy Spirit* by Sinclair Ferguson (116ff) on the fluidity of "regeneration" as a theological term.

34. See *Institutes*, 3.3, and Belgic Confession 24. For first generation Reformers, therefore, it was appropriate to refer to "regeneration by faith." This was not anything like Arminian "decisional regeneration," since they firmly believed faith itself was a gift of sovereign grace.

35. Canons of Dordt, III-IV, 11 and 12.

36. *Resurrection and Redemption*, 128, 140. On 141, Gaffin says the scholastic conception of regeneration, while guarding Paul's notion of the absolute graciousness of salvation, actually "works as something foreign and extraneous in comparison with Paul's ordo." Sinclair Ferguson has provided a very helpful summary of Gaffin's reworked Christocentric ordo in chapter 5 of The Holy Spirit.

37. For more on this passage, see my paper "Hebrews 6:4-8: New Life and Apostasy," available at http://new.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/hebrews_648_new_life_apostasy.htm. On the relationship between election, regeneration, and the sacraments, consider also the words of Leithart (from *Daddy, Why Was I Excommunicated?*): "In order to understand what baptism actually brings into effect, our thinking must be continually guided, as Cornelius Van Til insisted, by the Creator/creature distinction. Translated into sacramental theology, the Creator/creature distinction means that we must distinguish between membership in the covenant and eternal election to salvation. Election is the Creator's business; the covenant is the creature's business. God orders all things after the counsel of his own unconditioned will; we are to order our lives and the church in conformity with the demands, signs, and sanctions of the covenant. The Creator saves sinner; the covenant signs and seals that the church administers are means of blessing. The Creator's plans and works cannot be resisted; the church's administration of the covenant can be resisted. One cannot be eternally elect and fall from grace; but one can enter into the covenant and apostatize. The distinction between covenant and election is basic to the Reformed theology of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is a covenant administration. It is not a guarantee of eternal salvation; instead it is a sign of the covenant. What baptism actually brings into effect is entrance into the covenant and the covenant community of the church. Because the baptized person becomes a member of Christ's body, he is identified with Christ. The baptized person is, covenantally speaking, a Christian. True, the baptized person may not persevere in the faith. He may taste of the heavenly gift and fall away (Heb. 6). The backslidden Christian had real life, a real participation in Christ, and the powers of the age to come. Yet his was not an eternal participation in Christ. Ultimately (in terms of election), he goes out from Christ because he is not really of Christ (1 Jn. 2:19). Though covenant and election must be distinguished, however, they ought not to be separated. By persevering in faithfulness to the covenant (which is possible only in the power of the Spirit), one works out his election with fear and trembling. By the power of the Spirit, the covenant signs and seals and the Word lead men and women into saving fellowship with God. Engrafted into Christ and his church, by baptism, a child may grow quickly, only to wither and die. Or, the elect child may grow to produce fruit 30-, 60-, or 100-fold (Mt. 13). In the meantime, even the reprobate receives non-salvific blessing from baptism and membership in the church." Note that Scripture's warnings against apostasy (almost) never call into question whether or not grace was actually received by those who are the subject of the warnings (e.g., Mt. 13:22, 18:32; Jn. 15:1ff; Rom. 11:17ff; 1 Cor. 10:1ff; 2 Cor. 6:1; Gal. 5:4; Col. 1:21-23; 1 Tim. 1:19-20; Hebrews 2-4, 6:4-8, 10:26ff, 12:25ff; 2 Pt. 2:1; Jude 5; Rev. 2-3, 22:19). Rather, the warnings call into question whether or not the readers will continue in that grace by persevering faith. Those who do fall away are not portrayed as having never possessed any blessings at all, but as having spurned and forsaken those blessings (cf. Mt. 21:43).

38. On covenant conditionality, see Norman Shepherd's book *Call of Grace*, Cornelius van der Waal's book *The Covenantal Gospel*, Joel Garver's paper on apostasy at http://www.lasalle.edu/~garver/apostasy.htm, Mark Hornes's study on baptism at

http://new.hornes.org/theologia/content/mark_horne/why_baptize_babies.htm, and Dennis Bratcher's work on the covenant at http://www.spindleworks.com/library/bratcher/concepts.htm. In short, the essence of covenant keeping is promise believing. To speak of conditions is not to lapse into Arminianism because the covenant is completely undergirded by God's sovereign plan of election unto life and reprobation unto death. Arminians act as if there were only conditions, and no divine plan or irresistible grace. Extreme Calvinists act as if there were only a divine plan, but no covenant conditions. Both are distortions of the structure of the covenant as revealed in Scripture and taught by the classical Reformers. The covenant is conditional, but the demands of the covenant are only met by grace through faith. In the case of baptism, we may say that *receiving* blessing is not conditional, but *continuing* in that blessing is. Hence, the continual exhortations in Scripture for the people of God to persevere and live out their baptisms (or, in the language of WLC, to "improve" their baptisms; cf. Rom. 6:1ff).

39. *Call of Grace*.

40. Again, Shepherd: "In Eph. 1, Paul writes from the perspective of observable covenant reality, and concludes from the visible faith and sanctity of the Ephesians that they are the elect of God. He addresses them and encourages them to think of themselves as elect. A Reformed pastor can and must do the same today….It is true that some in the congregation may fall away and leave the church. Paul issues warnings in view of that possibility. Were some to fall away, he would no longer speak of them as elect of God. However, he would not confess that 'unfortunately' his initial judgment had been wrong. There is nothing unfortunate about the fact that we do not have insight into the eternal decree of God and therefore cannot make infallible judgments about the elect or reprobate state of people…Paul is right to address the saints and faithful in Ephesus as elect, and at the same time, he is right to warn them against apostasy." As Shepherd points out, in the Reformed church, the election perspective often swallows up the covenant perspective, such that election nullifies covenant. Actually, the Bible speaks of election from the perspective of the covenant more often than the reverse. Thus, we should follow Paul's example in referring to fellow covenant members as elect in Christ, regenerated, etc., even as we warn one another of the dangers of falling away (cf. Eph. 1:3ff and Acts 20:17-31; Rom. 8:31ff and 11:17ff). Shepherd is certainly in good company in formulating the relationship between covenant and election as he does. See, e.g., Burges' *Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants*, 25 and J. van Genderen's *Covenant and Election*.

41. Shepherd's close linkage of covenant, church, and salvation has unquestionable biblical and confessional support. In WSC 85, three things are required of us for salvation: faith, repentance, and diligent use of the outward means of grace. Note how the catechism's answer squares with Acts 2:14-47: The people *believed* what Peter *preached* to them, *repented* of their sin, and were *baptized*. This package of blessings is coordinated with entrance into the *church* and is called *salvation* (2:47). The catechism, following Acts 2, affirms the means of grace and church membership are ordinarily necessary to receive eternal life, not because these means are efficacious in themselves to produce salvation, but because Christ communicates, or bestows, his redemptive mercy through them. Indeed, it in is the ordained practices of the church (Word, sacrament, prayer) that Christ's promise to be with his people is most directly manifest (cf. Mt. 18:20).

42. *A Baptism That Saves*, 11, 13-14.

43. See Garver's helpful catechism at http://www.lasalle.edu/~garver/cateches.htm and his forthcoming article, "Regeneration: Problems and Prospects."

44. See especially Leithart's magisterial dissertation, *The Priesthood of the Plebs*.

45. For a useful introduction to some of these issues, consult Fergus Kerr's *Theology After Wittgenstein*.

46. See Millbank's *Theology and Social Theory*. Millbank argues, persuasively and stunningly, that theology is the *true* sociology. Thus, Leithart: "a theological account *is* sociological, and vice versa. If the social sciences are already theologically committed, then theology cannot supplement them but

must revise [or even radically overthrow them]. The apostle Paul did not believe that pagan feasts were 'secular.' Rather, they take place at the 'table of demons.'" Leithart's sacramental theology means that the Spirit's work is public and communal. Non-sacramental theologies (that is, theologies in which the sacraments are sub-soteriological and salvation is conceived of in individualistic, non-ecclesial terms) comply all too easily with modernity's privatizing distortion of biblical religion. To say that the Spirit works primarily through public, social means such as preaching, baptism, and Eucharist, rather than privately and immediately, is to lay the groundwork for a "public church," a church that is culturally and socially visible and transformative. See also Jeff Meyers, *The Lord's Service*, 135-6 on the public, communal, and mediated nature of the Spirit's work in the world and church. Contrast this with Sinclair Ferguson's individualistic account in *The Holy Spirit*, 124. Ferguson is correct to suggest that the Spirit works on the whole person since "the individual is a thinking-willing-affective creature." But he ignores the fact that we are also social and ritual beings, and therefore completely misses the public, communal dimension of the Spirit's work.

47. See William Willimon's excellent *Remember Who You Are*.

48. Philip Henry, father of great commentator Matthew Henry, is a refreshing exception to Marcel's lament. He said that when his children would disobey, he would "grab them by their baptisms!" What a great way to help a covenant child internalize his new identity! We must train our children in such a way that their whole lives will be a grand "Amen!" to their baptisms. See also Burges, *Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants*, 47.

49. See Peter Leithart's essay "'Framing Sacramental Theology: Trinity and Symbol" in *WTJ* Vol. 62, No. 1, for more on the relation of salvation, sacraments, and church.

50. All quotations from Peter Leithart, "Modernity and the 'Merely Social': Towards a Socio-Theological Account of Baptismal Regeneration" in Pro Ecclesia Vol. IX, No. 3, p. 325-329. Leithart's conclusion on 330 is worth quoting also, as a tight summary: "[This view of baptismal efficacy] is not quite Protestant and not quite Catholic. Using concepts of ritual theory, we have come to formulate the 'regeneration' effected in baptism in 'sociological' terms: Baptism inducts us into the community of Christ, confers a new identity, and imposes new responsibilities. But this 'sociological' account is, I have argued, equally a theological account. For the task of the baptized is service to the Lord in his house, his identity is 'child of God,' his privileges include fellowship at his Table. This is the 'new life' effected by the 'waters of regeneration.' These are 'merely social' facts only if one assumes that this house is not really God's house and this Table is not really his Table. But that, of course, is simple unbelief." See also *The Priesthood of the Plebs*, 136-155.

51. Baptismal assurance is a core dimension of the sacramental theologies developed by several of the Reformed scholars we have examined above, especially Calvin and Burges. Consider Burges' warm words to believers and their children (again, with spelling modernized): "Is it nothing unto a Christian, in time of violent temptation, when he has lost all sight of his Savior, to be assured that even in his baptism he received the Holy Ghost as an *anointing that shall abide with him forever*? Is the *consolation of God a small matter* unto a Christian parent, that in obedience to Christ, and in faith in his promises, he has presented his child to the sacred laver, where the Holy Ghost has seized upon him for Christ, so as, whether he lives or dies, he may conceive good hope that Christ has taken charge of his child and will provide all things needful for it, and give it both grace and glory? *What comfort* (says a learned writer upon Titus 3:5) *is it for a father to see his child washed with the blood of Christ? Cleansed from sin? Set into the visible church, yea, into the Body of Christ, in the right use of this sacrament? Wherein a parent ought more to rejoice, than if he could make [his child] heir of the world*" (9).

52. Jeff Meyers, *The Lord's Service* 132-4. Emphasis in last three sentences is mine.

53. The flip side of this point is that the language of "baptismal regeneration" is so widely employed in Christendom that our use of it could make us more "catholic" in the best sense of that term. Pre-Reformational predestinarians, such as Augustine and the fathers at the Council of Orange, used

“baptismal regeneration” language, so it is deeply embedded even in those parts of the patristic and medieval church with which we would most readily identify ourselves.