



ECO

A Covenant Order
of Evangelical
Presbyterians

Baptism

Theology and Resources

2022 edition

Baptism—Theology and Resources

ECO Theology Series

Standing Theology Committee

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Introduction to ECO Theology Series

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” — Romans 12:2

“Historically, the Presbyterian tradition has been especially called to explore what it is to love God with all our minds, being committed to the ongoing project of Christian education and study at all levels of Christian life.” (ECO Essential Tenets III.D).

ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians is committed to the renewal of our minds in the twenty-first century. This century is unprecedented in the church’s history. Christianity is moving from its historical centers in European countries and those places Europeans settled, to countries of the global south. Churches do not enjoy the same power in the secular arena they did in ages past. Secular humanism, the rise and dominance of a technological environment, and mass globalization have transformed the way Christians have to think. These are the patterns of the world. They are facts on the ground. But this is a radically different world than that of Jesus’s time, the time of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea, the high middle ages, the Reformation, or even of the period of revivalism. Although our theological traditions have equipped us in some ways, we need to confront our new world head-on, understand it, and seek to bring the message of the reconciliation of all things in Christ to this world. To do that, we must have our minds renewed.

This series of books is designed to equip you in the process of having your mind renewed. This renewal is never easy. It requires that we analyze the normal patterns of thinking around us. We have to reevaluate our traditional beliefs according to the Word of God. We have to ask where our forebears have been blind in the past due to their cultural situation, and discern how we might be blinded by our own cultural beliefs. With confidence in beliefs that are thoroughly rooted in the Word of God that are communicable to the people of this present evil age, we can shine the light of the kingdom of God to a dark and dying world.

We have hope: hope in the kingdom of God, hope in the resurrection of the dead, hope in the renewal of all creation. We are a people of hope with a message of hope. But we must be able to communicate that hope. These books aim to equip you to explain the hope that is within you (1 Peter 3:15).

Baptism Introduction

This book on baptism is the first in a series designed to equip you with tools to understand baptism in much greater depth and to provide resources for your church. This series is about equipping, not dictation. This book is not about producing official ECO policy on baptism. We have sought to answer common questions with tools for further study and to so grow the church in wisdom. This is the Apostle Paul's calling to each of us. We, teachers among God's people, exist to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to full human maturity which is measured by the full stature of Christ. We do this so that your church may become a stable vessel among a billowing sea of shifting doctrines and theological fads (see Ephesians 4:11–14).

We pray this book succeeds in glorifying God by building up his church to greater unity through greater understanding. Through baptism we are all made one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:27–28). Therefore it is imperative that we understand baptism as it was in Jesus's and Paul's day, rather than simply explaining what Presbyterians or Evangelicals have always done. The most truly Reformed position on baptism begins with the great call of the early Reformation, *ad fontes!* To the sources!

Views expressed in each of these articles represent the views of their authors. Although written by members of ECO's Standing Theology Committee, these articles do not represent official denominational perspectives which are confined to ECO's Constitution.

This 2022 edition sees the addition of the article "From Baptist to Presbyterian" which focuses on understanding the root differences that manifest in different baptismal practices between Presbyterians and many other Evangelical groups.

Part I: Theological Foundations

History and Sources of Baptism

Rev. Dr. G.P. Wagenfuhr

The Word of God is revealed to people according to their way of life, their language, and their culture. This is the *accommodation* of God in his self-revealing. Baptism is no different. For people who have been in the church or familiar with a culture informed by Christianity for millennia, baptism is understood as an action people do that is supposed to be meaningful. It is even used by faith traditions that have consciously rejected Trinitarian Christianity and moved in new directions, like Mormonism. But there is no baptism in the Old Testament. At some point, baptism became a new practice, and it's important to understand where it came from, and how it developed, so that we can be aware of why we believe what we do.

The first thing to say about the history of baptism is that modern people do not have much of a context for the reasons it developed. We wash, often daily. Those who work office jobs may never get very dirty, And we do not have much of a concept of royalty, glory, and honor that demands the kind of ceremonial cleanness that the Bible describes. Baptism did not develop in a cultural vacuum. There is no biblical evidence of baptism before the time of John the Baptist. This is important, because it reveals to us that something had shifted in the world of the Jewish people between the Old Testament and the New. Somehow, all of those people who responded to John's call thought that it was a reasonable thing to do. It made sense to them without it having to be explained or justified.

Old Testament Foundations: New Exodus

The first, and perhaps most vital background element comes from the Jewish imagination of the Second Temple period. After the Jews had been allowed to return to Judea and rebuild the temple after the Babylonian exile, there was an evident sense that things were not as they had been. Although in their own land, the Jewish people only enjoyed political sovereignty and independence for a very short period of time. From the time of Alexander the Great (early 300s BC) the Jewish people were subject to various Greek empires and then to Rome itself, with a short interlude of freedom as the Greek empires were failing. All of this created a sense of expectation among the Jews that a new exodus was needed when God would move in a mighty way to liberate his people from foreign oppression and establish them in the promised land. Prophets had long cried out that the reason for this foreign domination was Israel's failure to keep the covenant God had made with them. The whole nation needed to repent.

John the Baptist was a prophet who said these very things. He was critical of Jews who colluded with the Romans and whose immorality was fruit of their idolatry (Herod). It was in this context that he started baptizing people in the Jordan River. This would have been understood as a prophetic picture of beginning a new exodus. Paul understood that the Jews going through the Red Sea was something of a baptism (1 Cor. 10:1–5). This means that, for Paul, as for John, baptism wasn't simply about the forgiveness of sins. Repentance was merely the first step. Baptism was about a commissioning of a renewed people for a renewed purpose. It was a moment of liberation when the Jews were saved through the water of the Red Sea. But for the Jews in John's day, repentance was necessary to begin the process of a new exodus. John baptized in the Jordan River. This pointed to the two book-ends of the exodus: crossing the Red Sea and then the Jordan River. Both of these parted so that they could walk across on dry ground. John was symbolically bringing people into the promised land.

John also preached that he was preparing the way for God himself to make a grand appearance in a victory procession. The Jews, by repentance, would make themselves ready to receive the king and march in his train as God rescued his people from bondage to the Romans. This preparation would be the bearing of good fruit (see Luke 3). The coming king was Jesus, of course. And Jesus himself went through the waters of baptism to be commissioned to lead the people of God to freedom. Jesus sees himself as doing this mission in Luke 4:16-21.

Thus, Jesus also understood himself as beginning and leading a new exodus of God's people by rescuing them from slavery to sin. Baptism was, for him, the anointing and commissioning of God for his mission.

Old Testament Foundations: Ceremonial Washing and Sanctification

Baptism also has cultural background, both in Judaism, and in human religions in general, in the practice of ceremonial washing. ***In the Old Testament there is a technical notion of being clean or unclean that has nothing to do with morality or sin.*** Just as one would have to learn to follow ritual court practice in order to have an audience with a king (see for example the book of Esther), so too would one need to be as clean and presentable as possible. This type of cleanliness involved being physically clean, but it went beyond that. The water was symbolically washing away the common life so that one could enter the presence of someone sacred who cannot be associated with common or “profane” life.

Ritual washing and preparatory rituals are nearly universally present among human religious experience and history. Baptism would have been understood as a form of ritual purification. That John used baptism for entry into the promised land itself symbolized a delegitimization of the temple in Jerusalem, which was widely viewed as

corrupt in his day. See Exodus 30, 40; Leviticus 11-17; Numbers 19 for some examples of commands for ritual washing. Note also that *normal parts of life make you ritually unclean. Not only does one have to be without sin to be in the presence of God, you also have to be cleansed of your common life dirt*, blood, and bodily fluids (among other things). Another great example of this is the story of Naaman being healed of leprosy by dipping seven times in the Jordan River in 2 Kings 5. Consecration is often linked with using some form of fluid (water, oil, blood) to “wash.” In Exodus 19, for example, the people all have to be consecrated and wash their clothes before God will come down from Sinai and meet with all the people.

Jesus accesses this cultural background when he washes his disciples' feet. He explains that, unless one is washed by Jesus, he or she has no share with him. When Peter asks to be washed all over again, Jesus explains that he does not need to be fully washed again. Once is enough. But Peter's feet must be regularly washed, as do all of his disciples, because of their work in the world. That is, they need to be periodically reminded of their washing in Christ (John 13).

This idea of becoming ritually clean is called “sanctification.” To be sanctified is to be declared holy—set apart from common use. Holiness is not a moral status, though evil people cannot be holy. Good people are also not necessarily holy, and good behavior does not create holiness. Inanimate objects can be holy, too! Holiness is a declaration by God of a status, that one belongs to the temple/kingdom service and not to the wider world. To be holy, then, is to have an identity and mission based in the presence of God, rather than in the normal ways of the world. Thus, baptism is, again, a commissioning and a declaration. It is by the declaration of holiness that the Christian is commissioned for the kingdom/temple work. The washing of baptism, therefore, is the process of the world's identity and dirt being washed away.

This is why the Bible can talk about Jesus' blood performing this cleansing task (Rev 7:14). Obviously, blood is a sticky mess. Having robes washed white in Jesus' blood means that one's identity is freed from the dirt of the sinful world, and that one has received a holiness only available through Jesus himself.

Cultural Foundations: Initiation Ceremonies and Identity Change

This brings us to the third cultural background of baptism. Many, if not most, premodern cultures have had initiation ceremonies. In tribal societies these were usually performed on young men at a coming-of-age time. In various cultures young boys would be symbolically killed, buried, and would rise again with a new name and new identity as fully part of adult society. The Jews did not perform this type of ritual, because they were included in the covenant from the point of circumcision as an infant and wouldn't need identity change. Later Medieval Judaism developed the Bar and Bat Mitzvah as a

coming-of-age rite. This doesn't mean that baptism copied other tribal or pagan religious practices. It means that human social imagination of the time understood that *identity was given by inclusion in a group, not by the construction of the self*. It also meant that people understood that *it was only possible to change identities by dying and coming back to life, because identity wasn't a choice*.

Paul certainly interprets baptism as the symbolic death of an old self so that a new creation would come in Christ. He talks about "putting on" Christ as one puts on clothing (Gal 3:27). This is a clear indication that Paul views baptism as an initiation ceremony at which a person's old identity is killed and buried, so that a new person can arise with an identity shaped by Christ. The notion that this was a kind of spiritual practice marking an important life-change in an individual's life would not have made sense. Identity was imposed, not built. Christians would later come to gain new names at baptism, thus the idea of "christening" or a "Christian name" for one's first name.

Historical Development into a Sacrament or Mystery

Not only did baptism have cultural background that John, Jesus, Paul, and John of Revelation accessed, baptism continued to develop after the Bible was written. The inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God, and their rapid outnumbering of Jewish Christians, meant that important rituals like baptism came to have other background elements added on. This is how baptism became a *sacrament*. The Bible does not technically establish sacraments as sacraments. Jesus commands his disciples to baptize and to remember his death. But he also commands them to wash one another's feet and to say the Lord's Prayer. These commands are not, in themselves, what establish these practices as sacraments.

The concept of a sacrament has some of its background in Greek religion and culture. The Old Testament does not have a concept of sacrament or even of "mystery" apart from in the book of Daniel.¹ In the wake of Alexander the Great's massive conquests in the 4th Century BC, a number of "mystery cults" or "mystery religions" developed in Greek society, often as a result of influence from their eastern neighbors like Persia or Egypt. These were incredibly widespread semi-secret societies that required one to be initiated into them. This was new, because in religions that had developed before this period, inclusion in a community implied participation in community's religion. In this way, circumcision wasn't an Old Testament sacrament, because it was a sign of community inclusion, not a chosen new association. The rapid

¹ Daniel is generally accepted as one of the last written books of the Old Testament. Much of it was written in Aramaic, rather than Hebrew. It is likely that, after encounters with the Persians/Medes/Babylonians the Jews became acquainted with notions of mystery that were developing in those cultures.

and major rise of cities in Greece and the Roman Empire meant that there was a major flow of new ideas and religious practices as cultural diversity grew. Cults of Isis, Dionysus, Mithras, and Orpheus developed as alternative religious practices and groups. This happened at a time when people were also joining in with other voluntary associations to do things somewhat like life insurance does for us today. Urbanization broke down traditional religious communities and the communal care for one's neighbors. These voluntary associations and mystery religions arose to help with this.

But the mystery religions centered on specific mysteries or secrets. Obviously because they were supposed to be secret, we can't know everything about them today. But we do know one joined by a ceremony of initiation. We know that they had deeply symbolic practices designed to help people live into a religious myth. We know that they allegorized older common Greek myths to find deep, secret, and hidden meanings. We know that these groups spread rapidly through the ancient world, with the cult of Mithras being popular with Roman soldiers. And we also know that the cult of Dionysus invented the theatre, acting, and plays.

These cultural influences meant that Christians with a non-Jewish background brought in a theatrical element that was not present in Jewish practice. It is easy to overstate the importance of the mystery religions. But we can at least say that the very word "sacrament" comes from the Greek for "mystery" and that later Christian theological developments of the sacraments took on a sense of magical power that was present in Greek mystery religion. Rightly or wrongly, the sacraments in the developing church tradition took on pagan influence.

Having this historical awareness helps us be conscious of what we understand baptism to be accomplishing. The idea that the sacrament itself was effective for washing away original sin is a development of the early church that bears the hallmarks of the influence of mystery religion. But the idea that re-enacting a symbolic practice integrates an individual into a wider people and a wider identity is deeply rooted in the Jewish prophetic tradition. The difference generally was that Jewish rituals, like Passover, were historical memorials designed to inculcate new generations with the oral history and the identity of the people of God. Greek mysteries, on the other hand, attempted to separate an individual out of the larger group and put them in direct communion with the *being* of divinity. To oversimplify this we can say that Hebrew thinking is story-based while Greek is being or essence-based. In Hebrew thinking, we become *the people of God*. In Greek thinking, we become *godlike* or *divine*.

Biblical Sources of Baptism

For the forgiveness of sins, washing doesn't typically suffice in any ancient religion, including Judaism. This is what sacrifices are for. ***A baptism that forgives sin is something new that John the Baptist seems to introduce in the Bible.*** But the fact that people

responded by coming to confess their sins meant that they did not wonder at it. It made sense to them. That should clue us into something that has changed by John's time. We know that a significant number of Jews saw the temple system as corrupt and broken. Many refused to participate in it and whole sects arose providing alternative expressions of Judaism, like the Essenes. Thus, they had no access to forgiveness unless there was some alternative offered to them. By denying the need of a priest for mediation of sin through animal sacrifice, they combined ceremonial washing and the forgiveness of sins through John's ministry. Note that John the Baptist led something of a sect of Judaism in his day. He had his own disciples/followers, and they were not part of other sects like Pharisees, Sadducees, or Essenes. Nor were they necessarily followers of Jesus (Acts 19).

Another biblical source is found in circumcision which predates all ceremonial washings in the Bible. Circumcision is the sign of inclusion in the covenant of Abraham. It was a sign of entry into the *people of God*. Circumcision was to be performed on all male children at the age of eight days, and any adult male who joined the covenant people (Genesis 17). In the New Testament, the practice of circumcision had become a boundary marker for being a Jew. The leaders of the first generation church struggled with the fact that Gentiles were to be included in the people of God through allegiance to Jesus. The big question on their minds was, "Do they have to become Jews and be circumcised to be a follower of Jesus?" They finally came to the answer, "No." Paul writes about this at length in Romans and Galatians, and the events of the Council of Jerusalem on this issue are recorded in Acts 15.

So, the sign of being included in the covenant of Abraham (circumcision) was annulled by the Holy Spirit, who came to Gentiles (Acts 15:8). But that doesn't mean that the covenant of Abraham was annulled. In order to follow Jesus, Gentiles are grafted into the people of God (Rom. 11). They are made children of Abraham (Gal. 3). Jesus came to give a new covenant, which did not annul the covenant of Abraham, but rather fulfilled it (Gal. 3:15-16). There is one people of God and one way of entry into that people, by being joined to the body of Christ.

But what, then, is the sign of being included in the covenant of Jesus? Baptism by *the Holy Spirit*. Others baptized, but what was unique about baptism in the name of Jesus was the sending of the Holy Spirit. ***But it is not baptism itself that includes people in the people of God, but the Holy Spirit.*** This is vital, because ***right belief system does not make someone part of the people of God, God does.*** This is a core belief of Reformed theology. No one has the right to simply join God's people by their desire, they must be included by the Holy Spirit. No one can pledge their allegiance to Jesus (and really mean it) unless the Holy Spirit brings them to that point (1 Cor. 12:3). In the first story of Gentile conversion in Acts 10, that of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit first came upon the Gentiles there and then they were baptized to symbolize this (Acts 10:44-48).

If we take the narrative of Scripture as a whole, we can see that God is creating a people for himself. The Bible is not about personal faith-statements, but about God's relationship to his people, who are to be gathered from every tribe and tongue. Personal faith-statements are an important part of a person joining the people of God, but if there is one major error of the modern Evangelical tradition, it is that it has made faith into a me-and-Jesus personal relationship thing to such a degree that it often misses the point that individuals come to Jesus to *join the people of God and the mission of God*. If the church is the body of Christ, then the gospel revolving around Christ's body (incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, return) must involve the whole people of God. There are various ways in which inclusion in this people has been symbolized—circumcision and baptism. These made sense to people in their time. For us, circumcision seems strange. It takes a lot of explanation. And for non-Christians, baptism now also seems strange. We do not have temples and ceremonial washings. We don't have cultural notions of ceremonial uncleanness. So, that means baptism is widely misunderstood because people turn to tradition rather than trying to understand Scripture as it was written to its original audience.

Baptism is also linked to entrance into the Promised Land. There's a reason John went to the Jordan River instead of some other body of water. The Jordan is the boundary through which the people of God had to cross to enter the Promised Land after the exodus. By washing in the Jordan, John was very likely pointing to the desire and promise of a coming exodus/rescue of the people of God from their slavery. John was partly right. Jesus did open the promised land to the people of God by going through water, but this was really participating in his death and resurrection, not the purely political/religious version John and others were expecting. So, baptism also symbolizes the entry of the people of God into God's promised land, i.e. the kingdom of God.

The final biblical points I want to make come from the gospel of John. Two stories in particular serve to show John's understanding of water and blood. The first is the wedding at Cana in John 2. Jesus turns the water *for ceremonial washing* into wine. Note that this prefigures and foreshadows the meaning of his death. This might sound a bit far-fetched. But John is a very clever writer who delights in symbolic depth. Jesus is the living water that gives life (John 4). His blood is the true drink that all who want eternal life must drink (John 6:53). John is the only gospel writer to note that Jesus's body issued forth *blood and water* when pierced by a spear (19:34). And in 1 John he makes a point to say that it's not just blood or water, but both (5:6). Not only that, the Spirit agrees with the water and the blood (5:8), again connecting the Holy Spirit to the application of the reality that baptism symbolizes. ***John is showing that washing and forgiveness of sins are newly linked in Jesus.*** Ceremonial washing with water and cleansing via sacrificial blood are combined in Jesus. This makes the temple and sacrifice useless and now illegitimate!

The second story is Jesus washing his disciples' feet. Old Testament passages about ceremonial washing often refer to washing of hands and feet in particular. When Jesus is about to wash Peter's feet, Peter won't allow him (John 13). He thinks that he should wash Jesus' feet. But Jesus says, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me" (13:8). Peter then wants to be fully washed, which Jesus does not allow. Peter has already been fully washed. "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean." (13:10). Jesus has washed them completely. But they will still, through contact with the world, become partly unclean. And it is up to the disciples to wash one another's feet. There is one baptism, but there is still need for regular washing, *because his people are his body, the temple*. So, in order for us to be clean enough to enter the presence of God, we must wash one another's feet. But no one needs to be rebaptized, since Jesus's sacrifice is effective once and for all.

A Biblical Theology of Baptism

Dr. Amy J. Erickson

In creation, water is a paradox. It is indispensable for life, instrumental for washing and cleaning, and yet also—when gathered—a threatening force and possible cause of death. In scripture, all these potentials of water come together in the sacrament of baptism, which signals our cleansing, our death, and rebirth in Jesus Christ.

Water's potential for life and death operate at defining moments in the Old Testament. The ark which rescued Noah and his family from the devastating primordial flood prefigure the salvation of Christ as symbolized by the waters of baptism (1 Peter 3:21). At their rescue from slavery in Egypt and birth as the people of God, the people of Israel crossed over a dried path through the parted Red Sea (Exodus 14; 1 Corinthians 10:2). That same path became the grave of their Egyptian pursuers, who drowned in the collapsing waters (Exodus 15:10). And just as passing through water marked their exit from Egypt, so passing through the parted water of the Jordan River marked their entry into the Promised Land (Joshua 3).

In addition to marking key moments in the history of Israel, water also plays a significant role in the lives of individual prophets, priests, and people. The high priest is commanded to bathe on the Day of Atonement before and after entering God's presence in the temple (Lev 16:4, 24). Lepers are commanded to bathe before re-entering the community (Lev 14:8-9). The rebel prophet Jonah spends three days in the belly of a whale on the brink of watery death (Jonah 1:17-2:10), a timeframe which Jesus connects with his own death and resurrection (Matthew 12:38-40).

Yet although baptism is heavily prefigured by the water imagery of the Old Testament, it is not until the New Testament that baptism is explicitly described as a practice. It immediately features at the beginning of all four gospels. Jesus' cousin and prophetic introducer, John the Baptist, baptizes Jews who openly confess their sins with a baptism "of repentance" in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:5-6; Mark 1:4-5; Luke 3:3; John 1:28). Something striking is afoot: Jews—members of the chosen people of God—are admitting their short fallings to ritually re-enter the same river by which their ancestors had originally crossed into their present homeland.

As John explains, his baptismal ritual is only one of repentance and of "water" (John 1:26) that serves as a precursor for a coming baptism: the baptism provided by Jesus, a baptism of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16). Yet John is rightly surprised when Jesus himself insists on being baptized in order "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:14-15). At Jesus' baptism, all three persons of the Trinity are present. God the Father voices his approval of his son, who comes up out of the water to meet the Holy Spirit in the form of the dove (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke

3:21-22). (The Gospel of John, interestingly, does not directly reference Jesus' being baptized, although it records a similar event: John 1:29-34). Both the sign of the dove and the presence of the Spirit echo other baptismal-like moments of the Old Testament, where either a dove (Genesis 8:6-12) or God's Spirit (or wind, from the same Hebrew word) are present (Genesis 1:2; Exodus 14:21). At the close of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus instructs his followers to baptize other new believers "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 18:19).

At the beginning of Acts, the fledgling church receives the promised gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). As the good news spread, a muddled overlap of John's baptism of repentance and Jesus' baptism of the Holy Spirit persists (Acts 8:14-16; 19:1-6). This confusion indicates that baptism signals two overlapping realities: the exit (or exodus) out of one way of life (a life of sin) and entrance into a life sustained by God's own. What is more, baptism does not appear to directly cause the Holy Spirit's descent on a believer, but it does indicate the believers' receipt of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:47) as well as the washing away of their former life of sin (Acts 22:16).

Baptism also takes place as a mark of one's belief in the word of the gospel (Acts 2:41; 8:13). At the same time, it is significant as Presbyterians who celebrate infant baptism to note that at several occasions baptism is performed on the members of entire households (Acts 16:16, 33; 1 Corinthians 1:16), indicating that baptism is less about individual faith as entry into a community of faith.

Paul's letters disclose more about the nature and purpose of baptism. In baptism, we are joined with Christ in his death (Romans 6:3) in anticipating of sharing in his resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:29). Attached to the life and death of Jesus, we are reborn into one family of faith, united by a single Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 4:5; Galatians 3:27-29).

Baptism is a sign that we have died to our former life of sin and have been reborn into a new family, attached to the people of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and caught up into the life of the Trinitarian God by way of his own Spirit.

Theology of Worship, Sacrament, and Baptism

Rev. Dr. Laura Smit

The Life of Worship & the Task of Theology

Jesus teaches us that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. There is no part of human life that is off limits to the sanctifying claims of God. We reject the claim that love of any sort is self-justifying; we affirm that all our affections and desires must be brought under God's authority. We reject the claim that human souls are unaffected by the fall and remain naturally inclined to God; we affirm that soul and body alike must be cleansed and purified in order to love God properly. We reject the claim that the life of the mind is independent from faith; we affirm that unless we believe we cannot properly understand either God or the world around us.

The Essential Tenets

ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

Proverbs 9:10

Theology is a path toward knowing God. It is neither the only path nor a self-sufficient path, since it must be paired with other practices. The most foundational form of mental discipline leading to wise theology is worship. An uneducated person whose mind has been wholly formed by a regular and devout practice of communal worship will be much further along this path of surrendering the mind to God than an academically gifted theologian whose worship life is either non-existence or unrelated to her academic work. An example from the Bible is Solomon, who received great wisdom as a gift from God and was acknowledged as the wisest man of his age by leaders of the surrounding nations, but who nonetheless destroyed his legacy and raised foolish children. How could such a wise man do such foolish things? The turning in his path had to do with wrong worship. Once he decided to placate his many foreign wives by joining in their worship of false gods, his life-giving relationship with YHWH, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was broken. The Bible tells us that wisdom begins with "the fear of the LORD," an attitude of reverence and awe that leads to worship. When Solomon began to worship idols instead of YHWH, he lost that fear, and so he lost his wisdom as well.

Contemporary Protestantism tends to think of worship as synonymous with songs of praise, but worship is bigger than that. First, although worship is something that we offer to God, it is also something that God makes possible. It's important to know that

we are too weak and too ignorant to worship God unless He Himself assists us. The apostle Paul says that “we do not know how to pray as we ought,” but we receive help in praying from the Holy Spirit who supplements our inadequate prayers and prays on our behalf “with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). God the Son has taken a fully human nature to Himself and perfected it. That perfecting of what it means to be human includes leading us into the sort of worship that God requires. So the Bible tells us that Jesus is our worship leader, since He stands before God the Father, offering perfect worship on behalf of all His sisters and brothers.

Second, one of the primary things that Jesus requires is that worship be communal, something that is practiced with His gathered people, rather than being a private experience. The worship of God is the place where all Christians throughout time and space are united with each other, whether we realize it or not. So when we gather for worship, we should not expect that we have the right to control what happens according to our personal preferences. This is a time when we are being knit together with a multitude of other people “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). Even when we are worshipping alone, having a time of daily prayer or singing along with some worship music in the car, the power of those acts depends on the fact that they are shared acts, that other Christians are also praying and singing. The body of Christ is a community, and worship that is not connected to the body is not properly connected to Christ Himself.

Third, we speak of the weekly gathering of Christians as a “worship service,” which means that the entire time of gathering is an offering to God, an act of serving Him. The point of this offering is not to make ourselves feel a particular way but to submit ourselves to God’s authority, to offer our whole lives at His disposal, and to be trained for the work He has in mind for us. This happens especially through hearing, studying, and meditating on the Bible, which is the book through which God speaks to us most directly.

One traditional word used to describe worship is *liturgy*, which means “the work of the people.” Worship is our proper work as God’s people, and the liturgy is simply the pattern of how we do it. Some congregations like to describe themselves as “non-liturgical,” by which they typically mean that their worship is not as formal or as scripted as some other congregations, but in fact every worship service has a liturgy because every worship service has a shape, order, and pattern. More than that, every style of Christian worship ends up shaping, ordering, and patterning the lives and thoughts of those who participate in it. David Fagerberg says, “Liturgy creates a Christian grammar in the people of God” because in repeatedly moving through the service of worship we have an encounter with the mystery of God’s work in the world and in our own lives.² In fact, we are drawn into God’s own life through our acts of worship. Balthasar argues that

² David Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What Is Liturgical Theology?* Ch. 1. K153

in the Bible the revelation of God's glory and the response of worshipping and glorifying God are always connected. "Indeed in the Bible it is impossible to distinguish adequately between the two spheres of God's word and man's answer."³

To say that the pattern of worship creates a grammar in us is to say that worship reshapes our mind into the pattern of Christ's mind. Faithfully participating in Christian worship over a lifetime should change our desires by revealing to us what things are really valuable and what things are really not worth very much. Faithfully immersing ourselves in God's own words to us over a lifetime should give us wisdom about the nature of the world in which we live, as well as about our own nature. Faithfully practicing the discipline of glorifying and enjoying God strengthens our ability properly to understand and use all the other sources of theology – our own experience of God's presence, our reason, the Christian tradition, and of course the Bible itself. Most importantly, faithfully joining God's people in worship over a lifetime should bring us into God's own presence, giving us an intimate and direct knowledge of who He is. This is why worship is foundational for all Christian theology.

Worship is also foundation for all Christian living because glorifying and enjoying God, which is the purpose of all human life, simply *is* worship. In other words, this is why human beings exist. Our most basic purpose in life is to worship God. It is the thing that we do only ever for its own sake, just because it is worth doing, because that's why we're here.

The Service of Worship

Worship is the heart of the life of the Church. As C. S. Lewis says, it is "the appointed place" where God pursues us, rather than the place where we seek Him.⁴ Both building up believers and serving the world around us are important tasks of the Church, tasks that complement each other in much the same way that the twin movements of blood toward the heart and away from the heart work together for the heart's life. But ultimately the Church exists for the same reason that each Christian exists: to glorify and enjoy God. That is, the Church is called together to be a worshipping community. In the vision of the throne-room of God in the book of Revelation, the twenty-four elders (representing the full people of God from both the old and new covenants) fall on their faces before the One seated on the throne, singing a song of praise: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things, and by Your will they existed and were created" (Revelation 4:9-11).

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 6.

⁴ "No Beauty We Could Desire"

It is significant that the twenty-four elders are portrayed as singing. The act of singing is common to people of every culture, though it fulfills no practical function. Singing is something that we do not for the sake of any practical outcome but simply for the sake of doing it, which makes it an especially appropriate way to offer God praise. Singing depends on our breath, that breath which was first given to us by God at our creation. To sing well requires that we first empty ourselves of air, so that breathing in requires nothing more than opening ourselves, allowing the air to fill us. To sing well requires the engagement of the entire body, and a truly powerful singer experiences the vibrations of the breath from the feet to the top of the head. When people sing well together, matching their sounds with one another, the combination creates vibrations and overtones. For all these reasons, singing, especially singing together, is central to Christian worship.

The essential movement in worship is a dialogue between God's self-revelation and our grateful response. This is why worship involves both the preaching of the Word, by which God is made known, and our response of offerings, songs, and sacraments. God always has the first word, makes the first move, and begins the dialogue with His people. A worship service cannot consist only of response, so services that are only singing, or only a sacramental celebration, or only collecting offerings are incomplete as worship services. The praise and response of God's people is always motivated by His initiating grace.

The first word in worship is God's grace-filled greeting, as God speaks to His people, saying: "Grace, mercy, and peace to you." This is a grace that proceeds from within the inner life of the Triune God, offered in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and in their power. For it is out of the gracious self-giving of the three persons of the Trinity that grace is made available for God's people.

The congregation's first response in worship is praise, most fittingly sung praise. Throughout the Bible, God rarely shows Himself, but He is always speaking. Jesus also comes speaking, teaching, and calling. He tells us that His sheep know His voice, not His face. And in the Bible, God offers us words to use when we sing to Him. We therefore find that there is a priority in worship of sound over sight, so that worship is dominated by speaking, singing, and hearing. The words spoken and sung in response to God's offer of grace are words of praise.

The recognition of God's greatness provokes a second dialogue. Through the words of the Bible, God calls His people to confess their sins to Him. Confession of sin is the natural response to being in the presence of our holy God, for His holiness makes obvious our lack of holiness. We respond with prayers of confession. Again through the words of Scripture, God speaks, assuring us of forgiveness and extending His peace to us, and again God's people respond with praise, as well as with thanks and by offering peace and reconciliation to one another.

The rest of the service is the great dialogue of word and sacrament. The word of Scripture is read, but only after we ask the Holy Spirit to help us hear it correctly. Even in our worship of God, we are dependent upon God. The Scriptures read are the Holy Spirit's own presence among us, for this is the not a human word but the word of God. It is, as the book of Hebrews tells us, "living and active." God steps into the midst of His people in this gracious revelation. The revelation continues in the sermon. The Reformed tradition affirms that the word preached is the word of God. The preacher under the influence of the Holy Spirit is – albeit in an imperfect way – the presence of God among His people, calling them to be conformed to His will.

The rest of the service is a response to this word. Offerings are taken that are indicative of the fullness of lives and hearts offered to God, to whom we belong. The bread and wine are also offered, to be used to bring God's people into union with Him. The first words in the service of communion or eucharist are words of invitation, in which God calls His people to His table. The response of the people in prayer culminates again in a request to the Holy Spirit to make this sacrament effective. Just as the word of Scripture cannot be understood or opened without the Holy Spirit's power, so too the response of eucharistic thanksgiving in oneness with Christ requires the Holy Spirit's work. Here, for the first time, is a visual message with a visual and tactile response, as we see the breaking of the bread and pouring of the cup, as we in turn receive the bread and cup. "O taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8).

The worship service ends with praise and with God's word of blessing that is also a word of sending. When God's people go out from worship it is with the knowledge that God is turned toward them, making His face shine on them, lifting His light toward them and giving peace.

Sacraments

The classic definition of a sacrament comes from Augustine: a sacrament is a visible symbol of a sacred thing, which forms a bond of union. The sacraments are a "yoke" in that they connect us (or yoke us) to Christ. They are yet another way in which God accommodates Himself to the limits of our ability to know Him. Since we are physical creatures, knowing the world through our senses, He communicates with us using physical substance in the sacraments. The sacraments are made effective through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Roman Catholics believe that there are seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, last rites, holy orders, marriage, penance and eucharist. The first three of these should, in a normal way, happen to each Christian person once in a lifetime: baptism at the beginning of life (or the beginning of one's new, Christian life if one is a convert),

confirmation at the boundary between childhood and adulthood, and last rites at death. The next two represent the two main paths of life open to Christian disciples – the life of celibate singleness as a vowed priest or nun on the one hand or the life of marriage and family on the other. Finally, the last two sacraments are things that recur often throughout life: penance, as part of the work of confessing sin and seeking reconciliation with God, and eucharist, the sacrament of the table. The Catholic view of sacraments seeks to capture all of human life.

Most Protestants recognize only two sacraments: baptism and communion. However, most Protestant churches will also see all the other actions on the Catholic list as important acts of the church that have a sacred dimension to them. Most Protestant congregations have some sort of ritual that either completes baptism (such as confirmation) or leads up to baptism (such as dedication). Most Protestants expect their pastor or some other representative of the church to visit them if they are near death, to pray over them, and perhaps lay on hands or anoint them with oil. Most Protestant congregations see the ordination of pastors, elders, or deacons as an important, sacred action. Most Protestants also think that marriages should be solemnized in a church with a Christian service, and some Protestants will even refer to marriage as a sacrament. Finally, most Protestants confess their sins regularly, sometimes even to one another, and in many Protestant worship services the pastor will proclaim absolution after such confession.

All of this is to say that the sacramental differences between Catholics and Protestants – while real – are not as massive as one might think. Most Christians think it a good idea to capture all of human life as holy to the Lord, though the particulars of how this is done may differ.

The more important divide among Christians is between those who believe that these sacramental or quasi-sacramental actions are human actions of dedication or remembrance and those who believe that they involve the real, active presence of Jesus. The line between these two groups is not between Catholics and Protestants. It is between some Anabaptist, Arminian, or non-denominational Protestants and everyone else. Up until the 16th century, Christians believed that sacraments were symbols that created a genuine connection with the thing they signified. So, for example, the bread that was a sacramental symbol of the body of Jesus created a genuine connection with the body of Jesus. The earliest Reformers all agreed with this. Like those of the ancient and medieval church, Protestants in the Lutheran and Reformed traditions also believed that sacraments were given by God to allow us access to the real presence of Jesus. However, some more radical Protestants wanted a more significant break with the tradition and began to think of the sacraments as only symbols, as aids to memory or signifiers of human acts and commitments rather than as portals into the presence of Jesus.

In the next section we will think more deeply and specifically about the implications of this shift for understanding baptism and communion. For now, notice that it is a shift from thinking of the sacraments as supernatural events in which God is the primary actor to thinking of the sacraments as natural human acts of response to God. This movement toward naturalism had effects not only on sacramental theology but on many other areas of theology as well. It is not accidental that most of those Protestants who made this shift also believed that sin leaves us severely wounded, but not dead toward God, and so believed that they had an active, decisive role in their own salvation. In the post-Reformation period, with the beginning of the Enlightenment, many people became less focused on supernatural matters and more focused on the arena of human choices and actions. It is not surprising that this movement away from thinking about the supernatural has continued, until it has become difficult for many contemporary people to think of any portion of reality beyond what we can perceive with our physical senses.

Drawn to the Table

The sacrament of the table is called by many different names in Christian tradition: the eucharist (a name that signifies the thanksgiving being expressed in the sacrament), Communion (a name that may signify communion with Jesus or may signify communion with other believers also gathered at the table), or the Lord's Supper (a name that is rooted in the New Testament account of Jesus' last meal with His disciples). These names point to varied practices and varied understandings of just what is occurring at the table.

Some Christians understand the sacrament as being primarily or solely a memorial, putting stress on Jesus' words, "Do this in remembrance of me." Churches that have this understanding do not typically think that Jesus is any more present to believers in the sacrament than He is at other times when they pray to Him.

Other Christians understand the sacrament as being primarily about Jesus being present to us in the bread and the wine, putting stress on Jesus' words, "This is my body; This is my blood." Churches that have this understanding have various ways of explaining how the bread and the wine can carry the body and blood of Jesus, but these traditions have in common an affirmation of the potentially sacramental quality of the physical world. It is not surprising that these traditions (notably Catholics, Lutherans, and some Anglicans) tend to find it natural to link their faith with visual and tactile art. These are the traditions that are most likely to have a robust theological aesthetic, and it is usually grounded in their sacramental theology.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition also believes that Jesus is really present in the sacrament of the table, but rather than believing that Jesus comes to us, they believe that we go to Him. Not just the bread and the wine, but the entire sanctuary in which the sacrament is celebrated becomes a portal into the heavenly throne-room where Jesus is

reigning in His divine nature. The Eastern Orthodox tradition understands worship as taking place in the presence of Jesus and of Christians who have died and are now living in that same place, whose icons decorate the sanctuary walls. Eastern Orthodoxy also has a robust theological aesthetic, also grounded in their sacramental theology and centered on the writing of icons.

The Reformed tradition is closest to Eastern Orthodoxy, in that the sacrament is an act of ascension, not descent.⁵ The Holy Spirit lifts us into the presence of Jesus. Through the incarnation, the humanity of Jesus has become a source of new life for us, the new definition of human nature. Jesus is reigning in His humanity, fulfilling the original vocation of human beings to govern the earth, and demonstrating God's grace in accommodating human weakness. A Reformed worship service echoes the incarnation in the proclamation of the sermon, since the preaching of the Word of God is the presence of the Word of God. The service then echoes the ascension in the act of the sacrament, through which we join Jesus in His offering of humanity to the Father. Our union with Jesus in this offering is a work of the Holy Spirit. The turn between the descent of the incarnation and the return of the ascension lies between the cross and the resurrection. The cross is the culmination of the downward movement; the resurrection is the beginning of the upward movement. In between those two events, Jesus Christ encountered the negation of death, hell, and human sin, none of which have positive reality, all of which exist as nearly nothing, parasites on God's goodness. The supreme reality of Jesus Christ, the Logos in whom all reality holds together, flooded the unreality of evil. His nature in all its goodness, glory, beauty, and truth could not be contained by the shadows of death, sin, and hell.

Like the Eastern Orthodox understanding, the Reformed understanding is that the bread and the wine are real symbols, connected to the real presence of Christ, as a portal not a memorial. But unlike the Eastern Orthodox understanding, the Reformed understanding is that this portal is not stable, not under our control, but is tied to the event of celebration, an event that is transitory and contingent on the gracious act of the Spirit.

Through union with Christ in the sacrament, we really do have immediate knowledge of God, although in this life it is still fleeting and clouded by our sin. Still, when we partake of the bread and the cup, we are lifted into God's presence, transformed into Christ's likeness, and equipped to represent him to the world. Calvin says:

Since, however, this mystery of Christ's secret union with the devout is by nature

⁵ John Calvin, "We call it either 'the Lord's Supper' or 'the Eucharist' because in it we both are spiritually fed by the liberality of the Lord and also give him thanks for his kindness." Cited by B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 19.

incomprehensible, he shows its figure and image in visible signs best adapted to our small capacity.... For this very familiar comparison penetrates into even the duller minds: just as bread and wine sustain physical life, so are souls fed by Christ... [W]hen we see ourselves made partakers in [his body], we may assuredly conclude that the power of his life-giving death will be efficacious in us.⁶

Calvin is expressing a symbolic understanding of our encounter with Christ through the sacrament in the power of the Spirit. The great mysteries are first, that the humanity of Jesus is received into heaven at His ascension, and second, that we are genuinely united with Him. The bread and the wine are symbols that connect us to these realities. The bread and wine are real bread and wine, but they connect us to something yet more real, the presence of Christ.

Whereas the Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican traditions emphasize that the presence of Christ is dispersed into the world through the sacrament, the Orthodox and Reformed traditions suggest a movement of convergence, in which Christ is the center who draws all people to Himself. Through our sharing in the sacrament, the Church is also lifted up and also draws people to Christ, because this lifting up is a way of sharing in the glorified humanity of Jesus. Calvin says that "the Spirit of Christ . . . is like a channel through which all that Christ himself is and has is conveyed to us."⁷

Calvin embraces Augustine's understanding of signs and symbols, placing himself in a long tradition of Christian symbolic theology, an approach to theology that sees correspondences between this world and what he calls "heavenly things." As Richard Muller has shown, Calvin is generally standing in continuity with medieval thought, rather than participating in the new ideas of modernity;⁸ this symbolic theology is a fine instance of that continuity. In his "Commentary on I Corinthians," he gives the example of a statue of Hercules as a simple sign or representation of Hercules, something that certainly has

⁶ *Institutes*, IV.xvii.1

⁷ *Institutes*, IV.xvii.12. John Nevin, a later interpreter of Calvin, teaches the same thing, saying of the Lord's Supper: "It is not simply an occasion, by which the soul of the believer may be excited to pious feelings and desires; but it embodies the actual presence of the grace it represents in its own constitution; and this grace is not simply the promise of God on which we are encouraged to rely, but the very life of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. We communicate – in the Lord's Supper – not with the divine promise merely, not with the thought of Christ only, not with the recollection simply of what he has done and suffered for us, not with the lively present sense alone of his all-sufficient, all-glorious salvation; but with the living Savior himself, in the fullness of his glorified person, made present to us for the purpose by the power of the Holy Spirit." ("The Mystical Presence," *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist*, eds. Bard Thompson and George Bricker, Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology, vol. 4 (Philadelphia / Boston: United Church Press, 1966), pp. 33, 34.)

⁸ Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). See especially chapter 3, "Scholasticism in Calvin: A Question of Relation and Disjunction."

no power to summon Hercules and is in no way connected to Hercules' presence. In contrast, the dove that appeared at the baptism of Jesus was a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and as such a signal and a pledge that the Spirit was truly present. A symbol is something "by which the reality is presented to us," and so the symbol genuinely mediates the presence of the thing symbolized.⁹ Calvin considers the burning bush and the Ark of the Covenant to be Old Testament examples of symbols.¹⁰ In the case of such symbols, there is "a sacramental form of expression, in which the Lord gives to the sign the name of the thing signified."¹¹ So in thinking about the sentence, "This is my body," Calvin observes, "[T]his expression is a metonymy, a figure of speech commonly used in Scripture when mysteries are under discussion."¹² A metonymy is a symbol that "truly exhibits" the thing it represents, and when the symbol is God-ordained we may trust that he has joined reality and symbol to each other in such a way that the symbol leads easily to the truth it exhibits.

In his book *The Allegory of Love*, C. S. Lewis explains the tradition of symbolic theology in contrast to allegory. He suggests that although allegory is connected to symbolism, in that both establish what he calls an "equivalence between the material and the immaterial," the impulses are in other ways completely opposed. Allegory starts with the sensible world and invents something fictional, which is less real than the sensible. Symbolism, in contrast, tries to look past the sensible world to something more real beyond it to which it points. Lewis says,

The attempt to read something else through its sensible imitations, to see the archetype in the copy, is what I mean by symbolism or sacramentalism.... The allegorist leaves the given - his own passions - to talk of that which is confessedly less real, which is a fiction. The symbolist leaves the given to find that which is more real. To put the difference in another way, for the symbolist it is we who are the allegory.¹³

So to say that Calvin stands in the tradition of "symbolic theology" means more than that he had a way with words or liked to use metaphors. Rather, it means that he interpreted the world as a set of symbols that point to God. Calvin certainly stands in this tradition in his understanding of the Lord's Supper. This is both a supremely analogical and a supremely eschatological understanding of the sacrament. The bread is genuinely exhibiting the body of Christ, without being univocal with the body; and the whole of the sacrament points forward to the wedding feast we will someday enjoy, giving us already now an actual foretaste both of the feast and (more importantly) of our

⁹ *Commentary on I Corinthians*, 11:24

¹⁰ *Institutes*, IV.xvii.21

¹¹ *Commentary on I Corinthians*, 11:24

¹² *Institutes*, IV.xvii.21

¹³ C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 45.

union with Christ. Our current experience of the material world is a symbol of some future resurrected and transformed materiality.

There is a theology of beauty implied by this Reformed understanding of the sacrament. It will not be the same sort of affirmation of materiality that is seen in other traditions. It will be an understanding of the world's beauty as always inescapably gesturing toward the beauty of God.

Hans Urs von Balthasar says that an aesthetic theology must have what he calls "a doctrine of *seeing*," such that there is some way to perceive or apprehend God's work in the world, and also what he calls "a doctrine of *rapture*, of *being brought out*," for without rapture it is impossible to get out of our own "metaphysical systems into the free system of God."¹⁴ The Reformed tradition has a doctrine of seeing grounded in God's self-disclosure, that is to say, in His glory, and a doctrine of rapture experienced through our union with Christ in His ascension. This union is most directly experienced in the sacrament of the table.

Human beings participate in Christ the Logos's return to the Father by seeing the created world as related to the Creator. The human mind is designed to perceive the world. God's design for human beings is that we will understand, will *grasp* the things around us. In doing this, we reflect the image of Christ, who, as the Logos, contains, or *grasps* the essential forms of all that exists. When we grasp the world, we are being like Christ. We are also recognizing the essentially symbolic nature of our world, since everything we see reflects the deeper reality of God himself, the reality of his glory and his beauty. As Wordsworth says, "[W]ith an eye made quiet by the power/Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,/ We see into the life of things."¹⁵ When we not only grasp the world, but also love it, or – as Jonathan Edwards would say – consent to it, we make the turn from reception of the creation to an imaginative offering of that creation back to God in gratitude.

Through our loving attention to the independent reality of the beautiful creation we exchange the shadows of our own ideas about reality for the truths of God's glory and beauty reflected around us. This exchange requires the help of the Holy Spirit, so that we come to see "no longer from a human point of view,"¹⁶ but rather with eyes of faith. The turn involves the reordering of desire (*eros*) toward its proper object, God, so that our longing and desire pulls us into his presence. Just as the bread is really bread, but is also a symbol uniting us to heaven, so the created world is really physical, material, and good, but is also a symbol uniting us to the lasting kingdom, the new heaven and the new earth, and ultimately to Christ himself. Calvin's understanding of the sacrament

¹⁴Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. IV., *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, trans., Brian McNeil *et al*, eds. Joseph Fessio & John Riches. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989) p. 24.

¹⁵William Wordsworth, Lines above Tintern Abbey.

¹⁶ II Corinthians 5:16

allows us to think analogically about the created world and our knowledge of it. Just as the bread is not univocal with the body of Christ, but is genuinely connected to that body and genuinely makes that body available to us, so too our everyday experiences of the world around us are genuinely connected to the kingdom of light of which we are now citizens and genuinely make that kingdom available to us, without being univocal with that kingdom. Calvin's understanding of the sacrament allows us to understand all of reality as united in the person of Christ, who is the Logos in whom all things hold together. We as the church are constantly being expanded by the addition of a heavenly dimension to our lives. This expansion transcends the limits of time and space, uniting the church in a real, not simply theoretical, way before the face God.

As we read in Colossians 1:12, 13, we have *already* been given an inheritance in the kingdom of light; our citizenship has *already* been transferred to the kingdom of the Son. The world of our everyday experience, including things like bread and wine, books and churches, bushes that burn without being consumed and birds that are symbols of the Holy Spirit, all that world directs our attention toward the more lasting kingdom, for this world is dependent on the next. We are called to be people who are seeking a city with firm foundations, and that city is not here and now. However, we already have access to that city through the sacrament, and the sacrament is a promise that someday we will be residents as well as citizens of that city. In the light of the sacrament, we can see our present experience as symbolic of the world to come, pointing beyond itself to something more lasting and more real.

Part II: Implications

Baptism Across Traditions

Rev. Dr. G. P. Wagenfuhr

The Roman Tradition

The Roman Catholic position has developed over the past 2,000 years, and represents some of the earliest beliefs about baptism. Baptism is one of seven sacraments (see the next chapter for more). Sacraments, for Roman Catholics, are a “means of grace” in which God conveys his favor. The act of baptism itself, rightly performed, is effective in washing away original sin. This is called **Baptismal Regeneration**. This sacramental tradition of seven was not made official in Roman Catholicism until the Council of Trent (1545–1563), that is, after the Reformation had begun.

Roman Catholics believe that original sin is conveyed through human nature through the natural practice of human reproduction. If it is not washed away, a person will be subject to eternal punishment for the sin of Adam and Eve. Baptism washes this away, and it is one major reason Roman Catholics seek baptism for children as soon as possible.

This also means that no one can be a Christian without being baptized. There is no salvation outside of the body of Christ, the church. Roman Catholics believe that the visible church is the body of Christ. Historically, therefore, one had to be baptized and a member of a church to be saved, though Vatican II has softened this view.

Roman Catholics have always held that there is a need for confirmation alongside the practice of baptism. Confirmation is the end of a process of catechesis (training/education) in which a youth demonstrates that he or she is able to explain the essentials of the faith on their own. Confirmation is a sacrament too, in this tradition, at which a youth is allowed to take communion for the first time.

Eastern Orthodox Tradition

The Eastern Orthodox Tradition is not too dissimilar to the Roman Catholic position, though they insist upon the necessity of full immersion and the right performance of the rite. Deriving from Greek tradition, Eastern Orthodox churches speak of baptism as a *mystery*, rather than a *sacrament*, sacrament being the Latin translation of the Greek *mysterion*. Infants are fully immersed. Baptized infants would be expected to go through Chrismation at an appropriate age, which is akin to confirmation in Western churches.

Lutheran Tradition

The Lutheran tradition believes that the Word of God in the waters of baptism effect the forgiveness of sin. In contrast with the Roman tradition, Lutherans do not believe that it is the water itself that effects this forgiveness, but the Word of God “which is in and with the water, and faith, which trusts such word of God in the water” (Luther’s Small Catechism IV.3). God thus empowers the waters of baptism to effect the forgiveness of sins. Lutherans baptize people of all ages. For them, infant baptism is valid because God is the one who empowers the sacrament, not the faith of the person receiving it. They continue the practice of catechesis and confirmation, but do not see this as a sacrament.

Reformed Tradition

As with the Lutheran position, there are only two sacraments in the Reformed tradition, baptism and the Lord’s supper. These are not effective in and of themselves, as the Roman Catholics believed. Nor are the elements themselves empowered, as Lutherans believe. Rather, the sacraments are effective because the Holy Spirit is at work in them. Sacraments are “signs and seals.” ***They are symbolic acts, but they are not merely symbolic.*** The idea of a sign or symbol without any reality behind it is a modern concept that would be strange to the world of the Bible.

The Reformed tradition does not believe that baptism washes away original sin, in contrast with Roman Catholics and Lutherans. All sin that will ever be forgiven was forgiven by the act of Jesus’ death on the cross. ***Baptism does not forgive sins, it is a sign of an individual participating in Christ’s death, and thus having the benefits of his death conveyed or applied at the time of God’s choosing.*** So, baptism is the application of God’s forgiveness and inclusion in the people of God, and it really achieves this by the work of the Holy Spirit. This doesn’t mean that baptism is a divine mystery handed down by God. It is a human act that God honors with his presence. God is the one who does all the work!

The Reformed tradition believes that baptism is about joining the people of God by the covenant that God made with Jesus, who fulfilled the covenant of Abraham. Baptism unites all of God’s people by giving them the identity of “in Christ.” Baptism makes us part of God’s family, and members of the body of Christ, which transcends any visible church body or denomination. Thus, Reformed churches acknowledge baptisms of other denominations as valid, provided the baptism was Trinitarian (in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Like the Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions, The Reformed tradition expects a practice of catechesis and confirmation of its youth, and ongoing discipleship of all

who are baptized. The Reformed tradition does not see confirmation as a sacrament, but it is a vital part of being the people of God.

Anabaptist/Baptist Traditions

The Anabaptist and Baptist traditions have focused much of their efforts in theology on retaining purity and difference from the established churches of their states. They have consistently focused on the importance of a personal commitment of faith, as the way to join the people of God. None can be included in the people of God without making a personal choice. When these movements began they were rejecting any combination of identity “in Christ” with national citizenship. Thus, the great common ground between these diverse groups was their rejection of both Roman Catholic and “Magisterial” Protestant groups (Lutheran and Reformed). In order to leave these mainline groups, they had to make personal choices that often alienated them from their family, friends, and wider community. Thus, the focus on personal faith commitments became paramount. The cost of discipleship for Anabaptists has historically often been higher than for other traditions. Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed believers persecuted Anabaptists even to the point of mass killings. In some cases they loaded them onto boats, tied them up, and sunk the boats symbolically “rebaptizing” them as a means of execution. Regardless of the theological truth of the Anabaptist position on baptism, their martyrdom is both a black spot on other traditions, and a badge of honor to theirs.

This tradition believes that sacraments are merely symbols. The symbols do nothing and only mean what a church makes them to mean. Nothing happens at baptism. It’s just a symbol of an individual’s commitment to be a Christian.

Because this tradition began focusing deeply on personal choice, baptism became a symbol of a personal choice to make a lifestyle change. Later on, this became deeply linked with a personal, felt experience that should lead to conversion. For Baptists in particular, baptism came to be linked with a significant moment in which a person experienced conversion. Other traditions had not founded the faith on moments of intense feeling, and so would not necessarily link baptism with a single life-event.

Also, because personal choice to do something different was paramount for the Anabaptist tradition, they disallowed any who were unable to make a personal choice for Jesus to get baptized, namely infants. No one’s faith could cover for another, including parents of infants. Baptism was not about God’s promises, or the removal of original sin, but simply a mark of a personal decision to follow Jesus. ***In that way, baptism for the Anabaptist and Baptist tradition actually took the place of confirmation for those who grew up in the church.***

Some in these traditions felt it necessary to do something to mark the birth of a child, so they invented a new worship service “dedication” at which a child was blessed or dedicated to God. Although there are examples of dedication in the Bible, those are very different in which a woman would entrust the upbringing of her child to the temple and priesthood, as Hannah does with Samuel (1 Sam. 1–2). Likewise, circumcision was not a form of dedication, but a *necessary* act for a man or male child to be included in the covenant of Abraham.

The majority of churches in the Evangelical movement have come from this tradition, and so *it has generally been assumed that Evangelicalism is baptistic. But there are entire denominations that are evangelical without being part of this Anabaptist/Baptist tradition, including ECO.*

Pentecostal Tradition

The more modern movement, Pentecostalism, has its own views on baptism that mostly grow out of the Anabaptist and Baptist traditions, along with influences from Wesleyan Holiness traditions. Pentecostals hold to adult-only baptism for reasons similar to those listed above. But Pentecostals take it one step further by requiring two baptisms that may occur simultaneously. Pentecostals believe that the first baptism with water is an important symbol of entry onto the life of faith. But it is only by the baptism of the Holy Spirit that makes someone truly a Christian. For Pentecostals, this becomes evident when a person gains the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues and perhaps others.

In this we can see that the Pentecostal tradition began with the Anabaptist/Baptist perspective, but realized that the merely symbolic type of baptism lacked the work of the Holy Spirit. *This has led to misguided critiques of Reformed Christians that they lack the Holy Spirit in their theology and practice.* This is misguided because it assumes a Baptist/Anabaptist perspective on the sacraments and on the life of the church in which the Holy Spirit has traditionally always been understood to be present in the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

The more moderate form of Pentecostalism is known as the Charismatic Movement which has generally returned to the Anabaptist/Baptist position on baptism.

Evangelical Tradition

Evangelicalism does not have a unique perspective on baptism. Instead, Evangelicalism has worked beyond the boundaries of these different traditions and has attracted people from all traditions. Nevertheless, Evangelicalism is often wrongly identified with a Baptist perspective on baptism, due mainly to a majority of numbers.

Baptism and Ecclesiology

Rev. Dr. G.P. Wagenfuhr

Baptism is the means of entry into the people of God, the church. That means, if we have the wrong idea about baptism, we probably have a flawed concept of the church and vice versa. For example, if baptism is viewed as a service the church renders to families or to individuals, it has turned the meaning of church on its head. Baptism is the giving up of the self to be joined with Christ.

The Church is the Gospel

The church is the body of Christ (Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12, Eph. 3:6). It is the embodied continuation of the presence of God within his creation. It is empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is the revelation of the kingdom of God to the world (Matt. 5:14–16). The church is the community of reconciled people who are busy reconciling all things to God in Christ. The fullness of the church is the desperate longing of all creation (Rom 8:19). If the church is the body of Christ, and Christ is the substance of the gospel, and we are united to Christ through participation in his death by baptism (Rom 6:4), then we may rightly see that ***the church is the gospel and baptism the means of joining this good news.***

Church, Baptism, Gospel Confusion

But such a claim stands in stark contrast with many visions of the gospel as expressed today. In many versions of Evangelicalism, for example, the gospel is a life-transforming personal relationship with Jesus. This came around for good reasons. For generations of Christendom, many attended church because that was the thing to do, but they lacked a living faith. To that lamentable situation of nominal Christianity was introduced the need for personal faith. Many movements throughout church history have expressed this need, from the earliest monks to the Jesuits, from the German Pietists and John Wesley to later revivalism. Beginning in the twentieth century it was seen in Pentecostalism, Evangelicalism, and the Charismatic movements. Going to church wasn't enough, you had to have a personal relationship with Jesus. But now generations have come and gone and the fruit of this reaction to nominal Christianity is now ripened.

The fruit of the personal relationship with Jesus gospel has proven bittersweet. It has contributed to church decline as it transforms the way we imagine and practice church. If the gospel is about me and Jesus, then what do I need the church for? **An**

individualistic gospel will create individualistic churches that become service-providers. They offer services to aid the faith of the individual. They offer life-transforming lessons, coaching through discipleship programs, intellectual stimulation in Sunday School. They offer meaningful experiences of worship. They offer programs to help people thrive in life. They pursue the common good of their cities. In short, they exist to provide services, rather than put forth the call to lay down one's life to join it to Christ. These good works are important, of course! But unsurprisingly, churches that operate primarily as service-providers have created an environment in which church-shopping is the natural result. Churches have become consumer-driven and market-focused. They specialize to try and meet the spiritual demands of this or that subgroup of people. A church that tries to appeal to people will naturally attract people who want to be catered to, and so a self-perpetuating feedback loop begins in which consumers attend service-providing churches, and service-providing churches work hard to meet the market demands to attract and form people into a consumer-based faith. It is a vicious cycle in which none can be satisfied. Churches are always having to change, retool, rebrand. Consumers get easily dissatisfied and often don't stick around long enough for the real benefits to kick in.

If we were to invent a ceremony of baptism to fit such a church, what would it look like? Baptism would become a celebration of a personal spiritual life choice, organized and orchestrated by the ministry of the church. Baptism would become one of the greatest evidences of success and flourishing, used to show the efficacy of the ministry of the church in helping the individual achieve life transformation. And it would still not necessarily require a life of deep accountability to the commitment made at that time. If such a baptism did not last forever, and a person's faith or commitment lagged, a repetition of the experience would be readily available to start again. It would even be desirable for churches to rebaptize as often as possible to boost their statistical performance! Such church practices have become *plausible* in our time but would be unrecognizable to most of the history of Christianity. This is a broken understanding of baptism, the church, and the gospel.

Reforming the Gospel, Baptism, and the Church

If we want to do both the church and baptism rightly, we must reform our gospel. To do this, we must return to the source: to Scripture which alone has supreme authority for us. First of all, the notion of a personal relationship with Jesus that makes the church optional is entirely out of line with the teachings of all of the authors of the New Testament. Consider the following:

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matt. 18:20).

In context, Jesus is talking about accountability and confrontation about sin. He is referring back to the Old Testament teaching that two or three witnesses were needed to convict someone of a crime (Deut. 17:6, 19:15). Deuteronomy goes on to say that a single witness is not valid for convicting anyone. The implication of Jesus saying is that a single person does not constitute the church and is not normally able to be a trusted witness. How much more so if we're asking individuals to witness to the faith alone? Jesus is present in the communion of saints, not in isolated individuals.

On that, Paul says in Ephesians 3:16-19:

...that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your (plural) inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your (plural) hearts through faith—that you (plural), being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend **with all the saints** what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Note that Paul sees the indwelling of Christ as something that happens for the individual only as part of the church. To confirm this, we can look to the immediately preceding context of Ephesians 3:7-11:

Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰ **so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known** to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹ This was according to **the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord...**

Note here that the eternal purpose of God that is realized in Jesus is the revelation of God's wisdom through the church. The Creator predestined people, not to salvation (only), but to be part of his people and conformed to the image of Jesus. So, in Romans 8:29 Paul says,

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Note that this classic predestination passage, if read carefully, reveals that Paul is talking about the communion of saints, and the image of God. The eternal election of God is not about going to heaven when we die, but is about becoming like Christ, together. The image of God, as Paul sees it, is something only Jesus represents fully, and which we can attain *by participation in the body of Christ*.

It is together that we become the temple of the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 2:19-22, Paul explains that Christ has enabled us to come together in the one *household* of God.

This fits with his notion of predestination as adoption in Ephesians 1. We are adopted, not to a personal father-child relationship, but to a father-household relationship. Adoption in the New Testament is not quite the same thing as modern practices. In New Testament times it was usually practiced by social superiors adopting inferiors to gain inheritors, as was famously done by Octavian (who became Caesar Augustus) by Julius Caesar. We move from being “strangers and aliens” to “fellow citizens” with God’s people. This people is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, on what would later be called “the communion of saints.” So, it is only when the whole structure works together that it becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit. Again, God does not indwell us alone. There can be no me-and-Jesus personal, private relationship. No one can become the image of God in Christ alone. The entire goal of creation is the adoption of God’s people together as children, to form a household, a body, that is for the reconciling of all things.

Finally, the gospel is about the body of Christ. For Paul, becoming a believer is joining the body of Christ. This is not simply a metaphor, as though it were a nice image to help us understand some other reality. The body of Christ is fully realized in us, such that the sin of one member leads to the whole body participating in sin. So, in 1 Corinthians 6 Paul explains that sexual immorality actually joins the body of Christ to a prostitute (6:14–18)! He says, “He who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.” Our physical bodies (plural) together are the temple of the Holy Spirit, which means *we are not our own*. Our bodies belong to Christ as we join together in the church (1 Cor. 6:19–20). Just as a husband and wife’s bodies are not their own, but now are united in the flesh to one another, so too the body of Christ is united (Eph. 5:25–32).

We must present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. This is how Paul begins his teaching in Romans 12 about the body of Christ. Joining with the body of Christ requires us to die to ourselves and to the patterns or forms of the world (12:2). When we do that, we can be united to Christ individually as members of a whole working body. Individually we are not the body of Christ. Our unique gifts and abilities are submitted to the church (as also in Eph. 4). It is only within the life of the church that our uniqueness is rightly used. God has not uniquely gifted us for our own individual benefit, or for a uniquely individual calling, but to build up the church. So also in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul again explains the body of Christ and the relationship of the individual to it. We are the body of Christ and individually members of it who cannot rightly perform the function of the whole, nor operate independently. We need one another, and the unity of the body is of paramount concern.

Baptism in The Church-Gospel

Thus, the church is the gospel in which baptism makes sense. Baptism is the rite through which one goes to enter into the body of Christ. Baptism is the claiming of the

promises of God from the foundations of the world that we are predestined to become Christlike together. Baptism is not about joining an institution, but joining the catholic church—the united church throughout space, time, and tribe. It is about entering into the very purpose that God has created us for, to be the image of God. This is not something we can have, do, or be alone. The image of God is the representation of God, and this happens only through his family of adopted children.

This means that baptism is not about personal life-transformation, it's about the abandonment of self and culturally constructed identities to take on the identity of Christ. It is truly a conversion, a new birth. To become a Christian is to become a "little Christ." It is to "put on Christ" as the robes in which we are clothed (Rom. 13:14, Gal. 3:27, Rev. 7:13). Entry into the body of Christ can only come by death of the self. In that way, the gospel is not about finding our true selves, or about authenticity, but about coming to know ourselves as *crucified with Christ* (Gal. 2:20). Baptism is about receiving an identity in a relationship, not about putting forth an identity we have chosen. Baptism is not a badge of honor, a merit badge, or a tattoo. It is not a piece of flair that helps define who we are. Baptism is a complete stripping away of everything that we otherwise might be. In order to be clothed with Christ, we have to first be naked.

From Baptist to Presbyterian

Understanding the Roots of Baptism Differences

Rev. Dr. G.P. Wagenfuhr

Introduction

Statistically, most Evangelicals come from a "believer's baptism" tradition which holds that individuals should be baptized after they are of a reasonable age and can cogently state their personal, chosen faith in Jesus. In this tradition infants cannot be baptized since they are unable to understand and choose faith in Jesus.

ECO is a Reformed and Presbyterian denomination, which holds a "covenantal baptism" perspective that differs in significant ways. Although conversations between these groups usually focus on baptizing of infants, this is more of an outworking of fundamental differences which will be discussed in this chapter. This chapter will also discuss other traditions as they help make sense of the differences between Presbyterian and Baptist perspectives.

Ecclesiological Difference: Mixed and Unmixed Churches

The first and most basic difference between believer's and covenantal baptism comes by answering the question, "What is the church and who is in it?"

For independent, congregationally-governed churches in the non-denominational, Baptist, and Anabaptist traditions, there is generally a belief that the local church is made up of an unmixed group. That is, everyone who is a member of the church is a living and active Christian bearing the fruit of a life of discipleship (ideally).

For some groups, like the Roman Catholic Church, the visible institution is the God-given means by which people come to him in Christ. So, the Roman Catholic Church views those who are baptized and confirmed as Christians and full members of the body of Christ. They also have an unmixed view of the church because inclusion is not dependent on the will of the individual alone, but the efficacy of the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. Unlike congregational churches, however, the Roman Catholic Church's institution spans the globe and history. Thus, baptism joins an individual to the "communion of saints" living and dead.

Presbyterians differ from both of these perspectives. They believe with Roman Catholics that there is "one holy catholic and apostolic church" as the Nicene Creed describes, but they do not think this is the same thing as the local or global institution. Presbyterians distinguish between the *visible* and *invisible* church. The visible church in

its varied institutional forms, including the Roman Catholic Church and all other trinitarian Christian church traditions, are all *expressions* of the invisible body of Christ. Presbyterians, thus, have an ecumenical approach to baptism in which individuals are joined to the universal body of Christ by being included in a particular visible congregational expression of it. This means that Presbyterians believe that the visible church is mixed. It has many false believers, people who confess Jesus with their lips but do not have an active life of discipleship. But it also has true disciples. The goal of making the visible church equal in membership to the invisible church is an impossible task, and one that should be left to Jesus on the day of judgment.¹⁷ Baptism is the sacrament that unites a person to the visible church by claiming the covenantal promises of Jesus for the individual. The human work is in joining the visible church, the work of the Holy Spirit is in joining the individual to the invisible, catholic church. Individual members of local churches are still expected to live a life of active discipleship.

Presbyterians thus believe that there is a human and a divine work in baptism. The human responsibility is the life of the visible, institutional church in discipleship and mission (though God enables this too). The divine work is the forgiveness of sin, reconciliation with God, and power to conform the individual to the image of God in Christ.

Joining the Body of Christ

Baptists join the body of Christ by their confession of faith with a pure heart made public in the action of baptism. They join the body by their own choice.

Roman Catholics join the body of Christ by the power of the sacrament to regenerate a sinful person. The church brings people in and has the power of the keys of the kingdom to bind and loose on earth through its institutional form, which is an extension of the power given to Peter.¹⁸ Individuals thus don't really join the church; the church extends its arms to join people to it.

Presbyterians join the body of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit alone in a work that God initiates. They symbolize inclusion in the invisible church by expressing this reality as best they can in the visible body. Presbyterians recognize the work of God in baptism, not an individual's choice. Often, however, an individual's choice reveals the work that God has already been doing in regenerating his or her heart and mind.

¹⁷ See the parable of the enemy who sows weeds among the wheat in Mt. 13:24–30.

¹⁸ See Mt. 16:16–19.

The Role of Faith

Baptists hold that it is the faith of an individual that applies the work of Jesus to him or herself. God has done all the necessary work of salvation in Christ, but it falls to individuals to choose this salvation and life of discipleship. This means that only those individual humans capable of making mature and rational decisions can express this faith publicly. Baptist theology therefore struggles to make sense of how to include individuals with intellectual disabilities within the church.

Roman Catholics hold that salvation comes through the church's sacraments or means of grace by which the work of Jesus is performed anew for each participant. While Jesus' death and resurrection accomplished the work of salvation, it is through participation in the sacraments that forgiveness of sins and progress in holiness is accomplished. The waters of baptism thus wash away original sin because God has empowered them to do so. The faith of the individual or the priest is only of secondary importance to the power of God in the sacrament. So, Roman Catholics baptize people without regard to their mental abilities.

Presbyterians hold that it is Jesus's faithfulness to God's covenants that secures him the right to be our great high priest that makes atonement or reconciliation between God and humanity. Thus, it is not the faith of individuals that establishes the promises of the covenants, or applies the work of Jesus or the Spirit to the individual, but only the work of God. Thus, Presbyterians hold that baptism is a recognition of God's faithfulness as expressed through his covenantal people throughout time and space, and a calling upon God to include this individual within that covenant people.

The individual must bear the fruit of this baptism by a life of faithfulness to Jesus and his covenant people in ways fitting her abilities and contexts. But the work of God is not contingent upon human desires. So, baptism is not a recognition of human faith statements or choices, but a recognition of what God has done in establishing a people into which this individual is being included by God's faithfulness. This means that baptism can be rightfully administered without regard for an individual's mental ability.

Recognizing the Baptism of Others

Because Presbyterians hold that all trinitarian baptisms are baptisms into the invisible church, they recognize the legitimacy of all other trinitarian denominations or traditions, no matter the age at which it was done, as do Roman Catholics.

Among Baptists there is some difference here. Some strict Baptist groups require a new baptism when joining their particular local church. Other Baptist groups will recognize any believer's baptism as valid. But no Baptists recognize the legitimacy of an infant baptism, and thus require a new believer's baptism.

Frequency of Baptism

Again, because Presbyterians hold that any trinitarian baptism is into the invisible church and is made effective by God in the Holy Spirit, there can be only one baptism. A person who was baptized young, left the faith, and eventually came back would not need to be rebaptized because membership in the invisible church is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, not by personal behavior. Because God joins a person to his covenant people, nothing can undo what God himself has done.

Baptists, on the other hand, see apostasy as a forsaking of baptism. Because the church cannot be mixed, those who apostatize or live a period of extended disobedience, are no longer part of the church and will need to be baptized again upon re-conversion. Believer's baptism is predicated on an individual's faith, which may be temporary.

Covenants and Signs

Presbyterians have "covenantal theology." Although this is thoroughly expressed in the Westminster Confession, there are other versions beyond Westminster's. Covenantal theology holds that God has established a people by making covenants with them, that Jesus is the one true representative of God and his people, and that the gospel is about what God has done through his covenant faithfulness in Christ.

While the basic outline of this covenantal theology is shared among many traditions outside of the Reformed or Presbyterian lines, what is disputed is how unified the covenants are, and so how applicable they are to what we today call "the church." For Presbyterians, all the covenants are different expressions of what is essentially the same thing. So, Presbyterians see the Old Testament practice of circumcision for joining the covenant people as replaced in form by baptism, even though the meaning remains the same. The sign changes, the reality does not. Thus, baptism should be extended to infants just as circumcision was. And, just as in the Old Testament Israel was a mixed people even though all were circumcised, so too in the visible church are there a mixed people even though all are baptized.

Baptists disagree. Although there is some considerable diversity among these groups, they tend to agree that not all of the covenants are the same in the Bible. Some are outmoded and done away with, like circumcision. Thus, they see baptism as something different. So, where circumcision according to the Torah should happen on the eighth day of a male child's life, baptism is about a spiritual renewal without the formation of a particular people group and should be reserved for only adults or older children.

Dedication and Confirmation

With the creation of the Baptist and Anabaptist traditions in the Reformation period, a ceremony was created to replace infant baptism called dedication. Dedication tends to resemble many Presbyterian and other Protestant practices of infant baptism, but without the water. Dedications ask the church to commit to raising the child in a community of faith and discipleship and support the parents or guardians in their work. Although dedication and infant baptism look very similar, the reason for doing each is a different understanding of the gospel and mixing the two reveals an inconsistent or incomplete understanding of the gospel.

In the Presbyterian tradition, like all those that practice infant baptism, there is a practice of confirmation. Confirmation has most often been an opportunity for youth coming of age to confess for themselves the faith they have inherited in the church. Confirmation traditionally taught youth the basics of the faith through catechisms. Churches that practice infant baptism without a form of catechesis are out of step with the logic of the tradition and disobedient to the notion of what raising a child in a covenant community is about.

The process of catechesis (teaching the basics of the faith) is ancient and has long been administered to adults coming to Christianity and seeking baptism. Whereas Baptists and Evangelicals have tended to use baptism to confirm a spontaneous acceptance of the faith, Presbyterians and many others have focused on ensuring that the faith of the individual is not simply a feeling but is well understood and evidenced by fruitful living before administering baptism.

Conclusion: What is the Gospel?

Since baptism signifies entry into the people of God it tells a version of the good news of Jesus that differs according to the various theological traditions. Different practices of baptism reveal different understandings of the gospel.

Baptists tend to focus on the good news of Jesus as applied to the individual. Jesus died for you, for your sins, to give you eternal life, but you have to choose this. Baptist faith is thus typically more focused on holy living, which highlights personal responsibility and individual manifestations of holiness through moral uprightness. Baptists highlight the discontinuity and newness of the new covenant, thus often highlighting the difference between law and gospel.

Presbyterians focus on the good news of Jesus in the history of what God is doing in the world through his people, his invisible church expressed visibly. The individual is joining this people along with their dependents, and benefitting from God's promises to

these people. Thus, the Presbyterian gospel tends to prioritize the big-picture work of God and sees the individual fitting into this story through participation in the mission of the church. This is a gospel more focused on a grand vision into which personal morality becomes but one aspect of a larger cosmic vision in which holiness is expressed as much communally as it is individually. Presbyterians highlight the continuity of the whole Bible, its covenants, and the people of God. Presbyterians thus often emphasize the manifestation of God's grace in the Old Testament through what has been called the "third use of the law." This "third use" is seeing how the law gives positive principled guidance for faithful living apart from the "literal" phrasing of the Torah itself in much the same way the modern US Supreme Court does for the US Constitution. Presbyterians thus tend to see the law as part of the good news rather than something to be freed from. The law is an expression of the grace of God in forming a covenant with people, leading them in holiness to be conformed to the image of God in Christ, and so reveal Christ to the world.

Further Reading

Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ. Eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright. Nashville: B&H. 2006.

Part III: Applications

ECO's Polity on Baptism

Rev. Dr. G.P. Wagenfuhr

ECO's Constitution establishes how ECO is governed. It has a number of things to say about baptism both in how it is to be practiced and what is to be believed about it. These documents are given to explain a common center of belief and practice and are intended to be marks of unity in mission and identity rather than limitations or boundary markers. Here is a list of relevant points from ECO's Polity and Essential Tenets.

Polity

- Administration of baptism is the responsibility of the Session (not pastor alone). Polity 1.0603b
- Session must ensure that there is sufficient education about baptism in our tradition that it can be received by both congregation and the baptizand as a means of grace. Polity 1.0603b
- Those who have been baptized, but have not yet professed faith, or has not become a Covenant Partner is counted as a "Baptized Member." Polity 1.0401
- Baptism is required to become a Covenant Partner. Polity 1.0303, 1.0402
- New Covenant Partners with unbaptized children are to be offered baptism for children under their care. Polity 1.0303
- We do not rebaptize, unless a previous baptism was not in an orthodox Nicene tradition (e.g. Mormon, Unitarian). Polity 1.0301
- ECO churches baptize people of all ages. Polity 1.0301
- All Christian baptisms are to be recognized by ECO churches, including Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Baptist, and all other Nicene Christian churches. Polity 1.0301
- All officers must "receive, adopt, and be bound by the *Essential Tenets* of ECO." Polity 2.0103c
- All officers commit to seeing the *Essential Tenets* as a reliable exposition of Scripture. Polity 2.0103c

- All officers commit to being guided by the *Essential Tenets* in life and ministry. Polity 2.0103c
- Officers (elders, deacons) may administer the sacraments outside of normal church gatherings if they have been trained properly and have been pre-approved by the Session with guidelines for how the sacraments might be performed. Polity 2.0501

Essential Tenets on Baptism (III.C)

- The right administration of the sacraments is one of the three marks of the church.
- Baptism is a sign that is linked to the thing signified. Baptism does not wash away original sin, but it does “seal” us to the washing of sin accomplished by Jesus.
- ECO believes in and practices the baptism of infants.
- Baptism is about God’s initiative.
- Baptism is about membership in a covenant community.
- Baptism is a symbol of adoption into the family of God.
- Baptism signifies the cleansing of sin by the grace of God.
- Baptism signifies that we are sealed by the Holy Spirit.
- Baptism is about new creation.
- Baptism is a mark of entrance into the visible church.
- Baptism is made effective by the Holy Spirit in God’s own time.

Summary

In ECO, the sacrament of baptism is understood as part of the Reformed tradition. We believe that baptism is a means of grace and is effective. It is not merely a symbol. It is not effective in the removal of sin, but is effective in uniting the believer to the church and the body of Christ. God in the Holy Spirit make baptism effective at the time of God’s own choosing. Baptism is for all ages and any mental ability because it is not about recognizing an individual’s decision (though it must involve that for adults), but is about claiming the promises of God for inclusion in his people.

In ECO, as part of the larger Christian tradition, the church as the body of Christ is an integral part of the gospel. Baptism is the sign of entrance into the people of God.

Christian faith is not just salvation as a rescue from sin, but an entrance into the family of God as adopted children. Thus, baptism should be integral to the life of faith and the ministry of a church.

ECO requires that all officers—pastors, elders, and deacons—affirm the Essential Tenets without reservation. ECO's practices of baptism are integrated with its theology of baptism.

Baptism FAQ's

1. Why does ECO believe what it does about baptism?
 - ECO's official perspective is briefly outlined in its *Essential Tenets*.
 - ECO is part of the Reformed Tradition, a branch of Christian theology that began a separate tradition in 1500s during the Reformation. ECO's view of baptism is consistent with this tradition.
 - Evangelicalism is a modern movement, most of whose members have come from baptistic traditions that hold a different view of baptism.
 - ECO believes that its perspective on baptism is more consistent with Scripture, history, and reason than other traditions.
2. Why does ECO baptize people of all ages?
 - Acts 2:38-39 explains that baptism is a promise offered to children.
 - The Christian church has baptized people of all ages from its beginning. This has been the majority perspective throughout church history.
 - Baptism is not a celebration of an individual's faith choice, but a *sacrament* that God honors with his presence in the Holy Spirit that integrates a person into the *people of God*. ECO holds that the good news of Jesus is not a personal message only, but that God's mission is to adopt people into his family.
 - We believe that baptism is primarily about God's faithfulness, not our belief statement. Those who are not capable of formulating correct belief statements because of age or disability are not to be excluded from the people of God. We believe that Jesus achieved salvation from the wrath of God on sin at his death and resurrection. A person does not "get saved" at the point of conversion, but by the work of Jesus. The benefits of salvation are applied to the believer's life by the power of the Holy Spirit, symbolized in baptism.
3. Why does ECO not permit rebaptisms?
 - This is not consistent with our theology of what baptism means. One cannot be adopted twice into God's family. Disobedience against a parent does not automatically mean a parent disowns a child. God, as our adoptive Father, remains faithful even when we are not.
 - So, we believe that rebaptism symbolically shows that our standing before God is always at risk because of our disobedience. We believe this

is inconsistent with the gospel in which Jesus saves us, rather than our behavior or our correct statement of belief.

- Our tradition, like most of Christian history, links the practice of catechesis and confirmation with infant baptism. Infants are a celebrated part of the people of God throughout the Bible. But it is the family and the church's responsibility to raise them well and train them in righteousness (see Deuteronomy 6). So, confirmation is how a baptized infant learns to grow into a life of faithfulness to God. This does not mean they cannot be disobedient!
- The Holy Spirit is the one who makes baptism effective. The Holy Spirit's work is not undone if a child walks away from Christian faith. The work God begins in us will be brought to completion (Phil 1:6). Inclusion in the visible people of God does not automatically lead to eternal life. A disobedient child is a child nonetheless, and will still be subject to God's discipline, as will the family and church that failed in their commitment to rightly train the child in righteousness.

4. Isn't baptism merely a symbolic action?

- The Reformed tradition holds that the sacraments are not merely symbols. This is the perspective of a different theological tradition called "Anabaptist."
- Only modern (post-Reformation) people have ever held a notion that something was "merely symbolic." Ancient and medieval peoples believed that symbols represented a reality. This means that the authors of the Bible would not have understood or intended the concept of "merely symbolic."
- The Reformed tradition says that baptism is a "sign" and a "seal" of a divine reality. Baptism symbolizes a reality that God brings into being (not us). That reality is adopting us into his family. It is a "seal" in that God places his royal stamp on us, showing that we are part of his people, and that we are protected by him.

5. Why have I never heard of this perspective before?

- ECO is a blend of two traditions: Presbyterian/Reformed, and Evangelical.
- The modern Evangelical tradition was created in the 20th century as an ecumenical movement of lots of traditions to combat the growth of "theological liberalism" (not the same as political liberalism).

- Evangelicalism has never had a single codified statement of faith, it has no official leaders or hierarchy. It is not an institution. It does not require a certain view of baptism.
 - ECO values significant parts of the Evangelical movement.
 - It is natural that Evangelicals would assume that infant baptism is wrong because most Evangelical churches believe that. There is the danger of confusing Evangelicalism with the Baptist and Free Church traditions, because so many of these churches are part of Evangelicalism.
 - Films and popular culture tend to portray two main Christian traditions: Roman Catholicism, and Baptist or Free-Church Evangelicalism. These are the most numerous Christian traditions in the United States. Lutherans, Methodists, Anglicans, and Presbyterians, all of whom practice infant baptisms but have a different theology than Roman Catholics, are usually left out. So, most non-Christians and many Christians with no experience in these traditions are unfamiliar with infant baptism.
6. What can we do if someone wants to be rebaptized?
- Included in this book is a service called “Confirmation of Baptism” that celebrates God’s faithfulness during a time of rebellion or unfaithfulness. It includes nearly all of the elements of a service of baptism, but it does not include the actual act of using water. You can include a commissioning to a life of mission by an act of anointing with oil as well. In some cases, a change of name is appropriate and in line with Christian tradition.
7. What about infant dedications? Can an ECO church do a dedication if someone does not want their child baptized?
- ECO does not have a rule about this and allows freedom.
 - However, ECO does require that its officers (Pastors, Elders, Deacons, CLP’s) all believe in its *Essential Tenets* which does require affirmation of infant baptism.
 - ECO expects that its churches teach theology that is consistent with the *Essential Tenets*.
 - Infant dedication as a practice was invented for the specific purpose of rejecting a theology of infant baptism. Therefore, providing both baptism and dedication fosters confusion about the meaning of baptism.
 - It is the duty of the Session, by ECO Polity, to oversee that the sacraments are rightly administered, so that they are understood as a

“means of grace” and effective. Infant dedication does not measure up to this standard. (See Polity 1.0603b)

- Baptism is not a service offered to families. It is a service of worship to God in which families get to participate.
8. Do ECO Covenant Partners have to affirm infant baptism to join an ECO church?
- No, but all elected officers (Pastors, Elders, Deacons) must affirm infant baptism to be ordained according to ECO Polity.

Baptism Liturgy

Introduction

This service provides an outline for a service of the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is normally celebrated as part of the regular gathering for worship. It fits into the order of worship best after the ministry of the Word (Scripture reading and sermon), which can be used to help the congregation understand the meaning and purpose of baptism. Baptism is a sacrament for the whole church and so effort ought to be made to include the whole congregation as possible. It is more important to assemble the people of God than it is to use a special location. Private baptisms should be reserved for very special situations only.

Appropriate Texts for Sermon

Matthew 13:44–46
Matthew 28:16–20
Mark 1:1–20
Luke 18:15–17 (Matt. 19:13–15, Mk. 10:13–16)
Acts 2:37–40
Romans 6:1–11
Ephesians 4:4–16

The Great Commission

The pastor addresses the congregation

Jesus, on the day of his ascension gathered his faithful eleven disciples and commissioned them:
“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, as you go forth, make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to follow all that I have instructed you in. And see, I am with you always until the end of the age.”
Matthew 28:18–20
The pastor invites forward all those who are to be baptized or confirmed

Presentation

Presenting elder of adults and older children

N. (and N.) is/are presented to this congregation by the elders to receive the sacrament of baptism by professing the faithfulness of God, renouncing the power of sin in their lives, and to joyfully committing to the life of discipleship and the mission of the kingdom of God.

Pastor

N. (and N.), do you desire to be baptized?

Candidate

I do.

Presenting elder of infants and younger children

On behalf of the elders, I present N. (son, daughter, grandchild) of N. (and N.) to receive the sacrament of baptism.

Pastor

Do you desire that N. and N. be baptized?

Parents/Guardians

We do.

With the help of God and as far as you are able, will you raise your child to love God, believe in the truth of his gospel, to obey his call, and to desire his kingdom?

We will.

Pastor to Candidates

We glorify God for his faithfulness made manifest in our presence by your faith and we rejoice in your desire to declare it in the presence of God's people.

Profession of Faith

Pastor, candidates, and congregation

The Apostles' Creed

With the whole church, let us confess what we believe.

Do you believe in God, the Father almighty?

I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord;

who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,

born of the virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, died, and buried;

he descended into hell;

the third day he rose again from the dead;

he ascended into heaven,

and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,

from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic church,

the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,

and the life everlasting. Amen.

Covenant

Preamble

Pastor

Having confessed your belief in the Triune God of our king Jesus Christ, we come before our king to join his people sealed by his covenant. To join the people of God you must declare your allegiance to our king, reject the authority of sin and evil over your lives, and renounce a desire for lesser goods than the kingdom of God.

Renunciation of Sin

Pastor

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:3–4)

Pastor and all Candidates

Do you trust that God has been merciful to you, giving you the free gift of rescue from the powers of sin and the world by the work of Jesus Christ in his life, death, and resurrection?

This I trust.

Do you therefore renounce the authority and power of sin in your life?

I renounce the authority and power of sin in my life.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as the one who has saved you from this power?

I turn to Jesus.

Renunciation of Lesser Goods

Pastor

Baptism is the symbol of joining our life to that of Jesus Christ, not simply repenting of our sins, but also submitting our whole life to his reign as disciples. We participate in the death of Jesus and take on an identity given by him, not an identity that comes from ourselves or from the world. In baptism we remove the garments made by the world and put on Christ. In baptism we recognize the surpassing goodness of following Jesus, leaving behind all other goods.

Pastor and Congregation

As many of you as were baptized into Christ

Have clothed ourselves with Christ

There is no longer Jew or Greek

There is no longer slave or free

There is no longer male or female

For we are all one in Christ Jesus.

(Gal. 3:27–28)

Pastor and Candidates

Do you lay down your self-created and world-given identities to be clothed with Christ?

I put on Christ

Do you submit to Jesus as your rightful king?

I submit to Jesus my king.

Joining the Covenant

Pastor to Candidates

Will you be a faithful partner of this covenanted body of Christ, seeking to be equipped to join in the work of reconciling all things to God our Father? Will you commit to this body your energy, time, gifts, resources, to work together to reveal the goodness of God's kingdom to a world enslaved by sin?

Candidates

We will.

Pastor to Congregation

Will you, the assembled body of Christ, commit again to serve Christ your king above all, to disciple one another, and to grow these new followers of Jesus to the full stature of his maturity, so that together we may bear his image to the world?

Congregation

We will.

Pastor to Congregation

And do we together commit to the communion of the saints, the breaking of bread together, the teaching of the apostles, and a common life?

Congregation

We do.

Thanksgiving

Prayer

Pastor

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise

We thank you God that in the waters of baptism you save us from the power of sin and death. Through water you created this earth and give life. Through the living water of Christ you give us eternal life. With water you flooded the land to wash evil from your creation. With water you wash us from our sin and uncleanness. Noah's ship preserved your creatures from your waters of judgment, and through your church we are preserved for your kingdom. Through the waters of the Red Sea you rescued your people, Israel, from slavery. Through water you rescue us from our slavery to sin. Through the waters of Jordan your people entered your Promised Land, and through the waters of baptism we gain entrance to a land you are preparing for us in the great Sabbath rest. In water you confirmed the call of Jonah to his enemies, and through water you have made your enemies your family and commissioned us to make disciples of all peoples. You turned water into wine, and turned the water of cleansing into the forgiveness of sins. By your death and the blood and water that poured forth from your wounds, you have opened the way for us to be presented clean and righteous before the Father. And we thank you that the river of life will flow from your throne when you reign again on earth and will heal this creation. Give us this living water now and always.

Amen

Baptism

Candidates are led to the water. If pouring or sprinkling, they should approach the baptismal one at a time and kneel if able. If immersed, the pastor invites them one at a time down into the water by their Christian name only.

Pastor

N. I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Laying on of Hands

The candidates now kneel and the pastor lays hands on the heads of each of the baptized in turn, praying the following:

Pastor

King Jesus, defend your servant N. as *he/she* learns to love by walking in your wise instruction. Continue to empower *him/her* by your Holy Spirit to bear your image and your light to a darkened world.

[Chrismation]

It is appropriate to anoint the candidate's head with oil as a symbol of royal commissioning. Olive oil may be prepared for this purpose.

Pastor

Our King is called "Christ" because he is the Messiah, the anointed one of his people. This anointing symbolizes the conveyance of divine authority by a divine seal.

The candidate remains kneeling and the pastor makes a sign of the cross on the forehead with olive oil. The pastor repeats this for each candidate.

Pastor

N. child of God's covenant, you have been marked as heir of the kingdom with Christ and been sealed with the promise of the Holy Spirit.

Candidate

Amen

Welcome

Pastor

N. and N. have become part of the great communion of saints through baptism. Let us welcome them!

Applause

Let us pray, "Almighty God, we thank you that you have been steadfastly faithful to us, though we all like sheep have gone astray and have turned to our own ways. Thank you for adding to the number of your kingdom daily, and for making us your heirs and fellow laborers in your great mission of reconciliation."

Congregation

Amen.

Pastor

Now, let us extend a sign of the peace we have with each other through Jesus Christ. The peace of the King be with you.

Congregation

And also with you.

It is now appropriate for the congregation to share a sign of God's peace. Ideally, the Lord's Supper is celebrated after a song appropriate to the occasion with the newly baptized receiving the Lord's Supper first.

Confirmation Liturgy

Appropriately used when a re-baptism is requested

Introduction

This service provides an outline for the confirmation of a baptism. This is particularly suited to those who have walked away from the faith and desire to recommit themselves to a life of discipleship

Appropriate Texts for Sermon

Matthew 13:44–46
Matthew 28:16–20
Mark 1:1–20
Romans 6:1–11
Ephesians 4:4–16

The Institution

The Great Commission

The pastor addresses the congregation

Jesus, on the day of his ascension gathered his faithful eleven disciples and commissioned them:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Therefore, as you go forth, make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to follow all that I have instructed you in.

And see, I am with you always until the end of the age.”

Matthew 28:18-20

The pastor invites forward all those who are to confirm their baptism

Presentation

Presenting elder

N. and N. are presented to this congregation by the elders to confirm their baptism by professing their faith, renouncing the power of sin in their lives, and to joyfully committing to the life of discipleship and the mission of the kingdom of God.

Pastor to candidates

We glorify God for his faithfulness made manifest in our presence by your faith and we rejoice in your desire to declare it in the presence of God's people.

Profession of Faith

Pastor and congregation

The Apostles' Creed

With the whole church, let us confess our faith

Do you believe in God, the Father almighty?

I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

Covenant

Preamble

Pastor

Having confessed your belief in the Triune God of our king Jesus Christ, we come before our king to join his people sealed by his covenant. To join the people of God you must declare your allegiance to our king, reject the authority of sin and evil over your lives, and renounce a desire for lesser goods than the kingdom of God.

Renunciation of Sin

Pastor

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

(Romans 6:3–4)

Pastor and Candidates

Do you trust that God has been merciful to you, giving you the free gift of rescue from the powers of sin and the world by the work of Jesus Christ in his life, death, and resurrection?

This I trust.

Do you therefore renounce the authority and power of sin in your life?

I renounce the authority and power of sin in my life.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as the one who has saved you from this power?

I turn to Jesus.

Renunciation of

Lesser Goods

Pastor

Baptism is the symbol of joining our life to that of Jesus Christ, not simply repenting of our sins, but also submitting our whole life to his reign as disciples. We participate in the death of Jesus and take on an identity given by him, not one that comes from ourselves or from the world. In baptism we remove the garments made by the world and put on Christ. In baptism we recognize the surpassing goodness of

following Jesus, leaving behind all other goods. Let us remind one another of our baptisms.

Pastor and Congregation

As many of you as were baptized into Christ

Have clothed ourselves with Christ

There is no longer Jew or Greek

There is no longer slave or free

There is no longer male or female

For we are all one in Christ Jesus.

(Galatians 3:27–28)

Pastor and Candidates

Do you lay down your self-created and world-given identities to take
be clothed with Christ?

I put on Christ

Do you submit to Jesus as your rightful king?

I submit to Jesus my king.

Confirming the Covenant

Pastor to Candidates

Will you be a faithful partner of this covenanted body of Christ,
seeking to be equipped to join in the work of reconciling all things to
God our Father? Will you commit to this body your energy, time, gifts,
resources, to work together to reveal the goodness of God's kingdom
to a world enslaved by sin?

Candidates

We will.

Pastor to Congregation

Will you, the assembled body of Christ, commit again to serve Christ
your king above all, to disciple one another, and to grow these
renewed followers of Jesus to the full stature of his maturity, so that
together we may bear his image to the world?

Congregation

We will.

Pastor to Congregation

And do we together commit to the communion of the saints, the
breaking of bread together, the teaching of the apostles, and a
common life?

Congregation

We do.

[Foot Washing]

Pastor

After Jesus ate his last meal with his disciples before he went to be
crucified he demonstrated the true character of God. He rose from
supper with his disciples. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking
a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin.

Pastor and Congregation

The pastor takes up a vessel of water placed on or near a baptismal font, and pours it into a basin prepared for foot washing. The pastor, removes outer garment (robe, coat) places a towel over his or her shoulder and invites the candidates to remove their footwear and be seated in chairs facing the congregation.

Jesus began to wash the disciples' feet and to win them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him,

"Lord, would you wash my feet?"

Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Simon Peter said to him,

"Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean."

(From John 13:4-10)

The pastor (and elders if desired) washes the feet of each candidate and dries them with the towel. After this the pastor replaces his or her outer garment.

Pastor

When Jesus had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that you should do just as I have done to you."

Commissioning and Laying on of Hands

Pastor

The candidates (still seated in chairs) will now kneel in front of the chairs (kneeling pillows may be provided, or a kneeler with each candidate taking subsequent turns).

Jesus has commanded us to do as he did, to wash one another's feet. He has commanded that the greatest among us serve the least, not just within the people of God, but among all peoples.

On Jesus' last day before he ascended into heaven, he gathered his eleven faithful disciples and commissioned them.

Pastor and Candidates

Jesus was given all authority in creation by the Father as the rightful king. He commissioned his followers, and commissions you today thus:

You are given authority as ambassadors for Jesus. You bear his name, and are united to his body in the church. You have seen his character of loving service and you must now represent this King wherever you go, even to the ends of the earth. Will you be a faithful ambassador of Christ, empowered by and depending on the Holy Spirit?

I will represent my King everywhere I go.

The king fully expects that when his ambassadors represent him properly, all creation will give glory to God and will willingly submit to his righteous, loving, and reconciling reign. It takes training and practice to represent Christ rightly, and his church is our training ground. Will you seek out opportunities to be trained as a disciple and be part of an accountable community?

I will train to be a disciple of Jesus as part of an accountable community.

And finally, as you grow into the full stature of the maturity of Christ, will you make disciples of Jesus?

With the help of God, I will.

The pastor places his hands on each candidate and says the following prayer:

Pastor

Father, protect N, your servant. Keep him/her in your grace and give everything needed to follow your Son faithfully. Equip him/her for your mission, and continually reveal your heart of reconciliation. Grant him/her to live with Christ just as he/she has died with Christ, placing all hope in the resurrection and life everlasting as heirs of your kingdom through Christ, our King.

Candidate

Amen.

Pastor and Congregation

Family of God, it is your duty to be the training ground of discipleship for these believers. It is your calling to help equip them for the work of ministry. Do you acknowledge your responsibility and will you joyfully seek to aid in the discipleship of these who are confirming their baptism today?

We know our duty and our calling to make disciples of Jesus and to train them in his wisdom, and we joyfully add to our number these candidates today.

[Chrismation]

It is appropriate at confirmation to anoint the candidate's head with oil as a symbol of royal commissioning. Olive oil may be prepared for this purpose.

Pastor

Our King is called "Christ" because he is the Messiah, the anointed one of his people. This anointing symbolizes the conveyance of divine authority. Just as Samuel anointed the young shepherd David to become king, so too we anoint those who are confirming their baptism and so taking upon themselves the great gift of responsibility of the mission of God to reconcile all things to himself.

The candidate remains kneeling and the pastor makes a sign of the cross on the forehead with olive oil. The pastor repeats this for each candidate.

Pastor

Arise, disciple of King Jesus. And may the peace of our King be with you.

Candidate

And also with you.

Welcome

Pastor

Welcome into our fellowship of disciples. Let us pray, "Almighty God, we thank you that you have been steadfastly faithful to us, though we all like sheep have gone astray and have turned to our own ways. Thank you for adding to the number of your kingdom daily, and for making us your heirs and fellow laborers in your great mission of reconciliation."

Congregation

Amen.

Pastor

Now, let us extend a sign of the peace we have with each other through Jesus Christ. The peace of the King be with you.

Congregation

And also with you.

It is now appropriate for the congregation to share a sign of God's peace. Ideally, the Lord's Supper is celebrated after a song appropriate to the occasion.

Baptism Vocabulary and Glossary

Anoint

A symbolic action of consecration; or setting someone or something apart for a different purpose. Historically a common associated practice with baptism.

Baptism

From Greek *bapto* (βάπτω) and *baptizo* (βαπτίζω). The first in the NT only means a normal sense of immersing something. The latter is only used with reference to a specific rite. The words outside of the Bible had meanings of going underwater, often in the form of drowning, or being shipwrecked. It also meant simply dipping something, like dying cloth.

In Jewish tradition around the time of Jesus, a practice of washing for proselytes (Gentile converts to Judaism) arose, which may provide a key backdrop to NT baptism.

Catechesis

The process in which someone is prepared for fully membership in the church by learning the rudiments of the Christian faith. This has often happened through various ***catechisms*** or documents written in a question and answer form for the ease of learning.

Catechumen

A person who is going through catechism leading up to either baptism or confirmation.

Chrism

To anoint someone with oil. In most ancient Christian baptismal traditions, the baptizand would arise from the water and be anointed with oil which was the “seal” of baptism.

Cleanness/Purity (ritual)

Nearly all religions prior to modernity have held a concept of ritual cleanness or purity that is not (necessarily) related to morality. Ritual impurity is a vital concept of the OT

Torah. Ritual impurity is not allowed in God's presence and must be cleansed by ritual washings. These washings are not tied to sin or forgiveness.

Consecrate/Consecration

The action of setting something apart from common use by declaring it holy or reserved for the use of God alone. In baptism this can refer to the declaration of the baptizand as now set apart for Christ after the traditional rejection of allegiance to the Devil. It has also been used in relation to priests/pastors in ordination, or in the Lord's Supper for the prayer that sets the bread and wine apart to represent the body and blood of Jesus.

Elements

In the sacraments there are "elements," which are the physical objects used to symbolize a spiritual reality. For Baptism the element is the water (sometimes also oil). For the Lord's Supper the elements are the bread and wine.

Evangelical(ism)

While originally from a Greek word that means gospel, *euangelion* (ευαγγελιον) has come to be used by many different groups in Christian history as a self-descriptor. In the modern Anglo-American context, as it is used throughout this book, Evangelical refers to an organic movement of conservative Christianity that has much of its roots in the United States. While tied to early revivalist movements, it grew as a major social force in the USA during the early-mid 20th century as a conscious reaction toward "modernism" or theological liberalism. Growing out of Fundamentalism, Evangelicals focus on particular doctrines for statements of faith, including the inerrancy/infallibility of Scripture, the virgin birth and divinity of Jesus Christ, the reality of miracles in Scripture, the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus, the need for conversion, and the importance of evangelism. The overwhelming majority of Evangelicals are from Baptist and independent church backgrounds, leading many to assume that adult-only baptism is a mandated belief of the movement. ECO is Evangelical in agreeing to its fundamental beliefs, but not necessarily in its cultural expressions or beliefs about the sacraments or ecclesiology (theology of the church).

Grace

From Latin *gratia* for "favor" both in showing favor and standing in favor. In Greek NT it

is *charis* (χάρις), which is similar in meaning to the Latin. God's favor is expressed by the gifts he gives, including justification, sanctification, salvation, peace, joy, etc.

Holy/Holiness

This word has historically not referred to moral status. Holiness is a quality declared by God of separation from common use for divine purpose. Thus, objects devoted to the temple in the OT were called "holy" and could not be used for normal purposes. Moral excellence is expected of holiness, but that's not what it means.

Institution

The sacraments are said to be "instituted" by Jesus. This means Jesus established them. Anabaptist and Baptist traditions have tended to use this term or "ordinance" rather than "sacrament" to express their belief that it has no intrinsic connection to divine action, but was only established as a memorial practice by Christ.

Means of Grace

Particular and established/instituted ways God shows his favor to his people. While all Christians agree on God's Word as a means of grace, debated are the sacraments and their number.

Method (of Baptism)

Traditions differ on how someone is to be baptized. Some require full immersion (Eastern Orthodox, Baptists), in which a person must go underwater. Some allow for sprinkling or prefer sprinkling (related to Old Testament practices). Debates have raged about whether water needs to be "living" (moving), about how many times one enters the water or has it sprinkled (once or thrice). ECO does not give any official guidance on these questions, seeing them as non-essential.

Mystery

From Greek *musterion* (μυστήριον). Something secret or hidden. A very popular form of pagan religious expression in the time of the New Testament (but not the Old) was initiation into secret religious societies done by special rites with deeply symbolic meanings. Although probably not intended in the New Testament, the early imperial

church (300s on) began to treat baptism and the eucharist in ways similar to the rites of mystery religions, involving secrecy, highly ritualized and symbolic actions, and a belief in magical transformations accomplished by the rites.

Ontology

The study and discussion of the nature of being. Ontology asks the question, “What is being/existence?” The heart of debates about the sacraments comes down to debates about ontology, whether we know it or not. Broadly speaking there are three positions: 1. The sacraments are themselves a reality (Roman, Orthodox, Lutheran); 2. The sacraments symbolize a reality (Reformed); 3. The sacraments are historical memorials and do not point to a hidden reality (Anabaptist/Baptist/Charismatic).

Regeneration

Baptismal regeneration is the belief that baptism itself forgives sins. It is the perspective of the early and modern Roman Catholic Church, as well as the Eastern Orthodox. Few Protestants hold this position.

Reformed

The Reformed movement refers to a diverse group of Protestant traditions originating mainly in Switzerland from the figures of Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) and John Calvin (1509–1564). This tradition has focused on the central authority of Scripture and the emphasis on the sovereignty of God. Its perspectives on the sacraments and ecclesiology are diverse, such that, while Presbyterians are Reformed, they do not share a sacramental theology with Reformed Baptists, for example.

Sacrament

From Latin, *sacramentum*, a translation of Greek *mysterion* (mystery). A sacrament is a “visible sign of a sacred thing” according to Augustine. Jerome, in translating the Vulgate (Latin version of the Bible), translated every instance of Greek *mysterion* into *sacramentum*.

Only later did “sacrament” come to have a more technical and enumerated use as applied to seven or two specific practices of the church.

Seal

In the context of sacramental discussion, a seal is a divine mark, like a royal seal in wax. This has the meanings of protection, trust, authority, and belonging. To be sealed in Christ is to have a royal stamp of approval that also establishes that the believer belongs to Christ.

Symbol

From Greek *sumbolon* (σύμβολον) originally meaning a token or tally-stick, thus similar to a seal. It is not used in the NT. A tally-stick was an ancient device for record keeping in which a creditor and debtor would make specific notches on a stick and split it down the middle as a way of proof of identity when the debt would be demanded or repaid. By extension it came to mean anything that signified an absent identity. It came to refer to a contract, a secret statement or password. In Christian history it came to be used for a creedal statement. The affirmation of the Apostles' Creed, for example was one's token to initiation into the church.

Sign

From Latin *signum*. Like "seal" and "symbol," it is related to a token. A sign is a visible object that represents something that is, at the moment invisible or absent. For ancients, words were not themselves signs or symbols, but were realities in themselves. Thus, the Word of God in John 1 is not a sign representing God but is God himself. Sign and symbol are central concepts to sacraments.