

## **Baptism as a Sacrament of the Covenant**

By Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Professor of Old Testament,  
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, FL

Most Christians who identify themselves as Reformed or Calvinistic affirm that baptism is a sacrament of the covenant of grace. Although different branches of the Reformed tradition highlight different aspects of baptism, the major Reformed confessions and catechisms emphasize that baptism is both sacramental and covenantal.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, we will concern ourselves first with the Reformed concept of baptism as a sacrament. Second, we will focus on baptism's covenantal character.

### **Baptism as Sacramental**

In its own way, the Reformed understanding of baptism is highly sacramental. That is, Reformed theology views baptism as a mysterious encounter with God that takes place through a rite involving physical elements and special ceremony. Through this encounter, God graciously distributes blessings to those who participate by faith and also judgment to those who participate without faith.

The technical use of the term "sacrament" derives from Ephesians 5:32 in the Vulgate, where *sacramentum* translates the Greek word *mustērion*, meaning "mystery." Prior to the Reformation, "sacrament" denoted a variety of rites that led to experiences of God's grace in ways that exceeded the limitations of human understanding. After varying formulations competed for dominance in the medieval church, the Council of Trent (1545) finally assigned the term "sacrament" to seven central rites: baptism, confirmation, holy eucharist, penance, extreme unction, orders and matrimony.<sup>2</sup>

Calvin and most other contemporary Protestants leaders rejected the Roman Catholic sacramental system but retained its vocabulary, applying the term "sacrament" only to ordinances instituted by God himself (cf. WCF 27; BC

---

<sup>1</sup> See Marcel, Pierre. *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism: Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace* (London: James Clarke, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> See Berkouwer, G.C. *The Sacraments* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 27ff.

33). They insisted that baptism and the Lord's Supper, and only these two ordinances, were instituted by Christ and confirmed by his apostles as sacraments for the church. They also retained the idea that the sacraments are "means of grace," vehicles through which God is pleased to apply grace to believers (WCF 14.1). Reformed theologians insisted, however, that such grace only accompanied the proper administration and appropriation of the sacraments.

This conception of sacraments as "means of grace" provides a helpful framework for examining some of the distinctives of the Reformed doctrine of baptism. In particular, it is useful to examine the Reformed assertion that there are both *connections* and *separations* between baptism and divine grace.

### *Connections between Baptism and Grace*

On the one side, calling baptism a "means of grace" distinguishes the Reformed tradition from Protestants who conceive of baptism as a mere symbol. Unlike Baptists and Anabaptists who tend to speak of baptism only as an "ordinance" or a "memorial," Calvinists have characteristically spoken of baptism not only as an ordinance but also as a sacrament or a mystery, a rite through which God applies grace.

Although the Reformed vocabulary of "sacrament" was adopted from Roman Catholicism, the basis for recognizing sacraments as means of grace was inferred from Scripture. With specific regard to baptism, it is worth noting that the New Testament never describes baptism as something ordinary or natural; it never speaks of baptism as a mere symbol. The language of "sacrament" was sustained by Reformed churches precisely because the New Testament ties baptism so closely to the bestowal of divine grace.

For example, Paul spoke of baptism as "the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Tit. 3:5). He also wrote that, through baptism, believers are united to Christ and die to sin (Rom. 6:3-7). Peter, in turn, when asked what was required for salvation, replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Elsewhere, Peter boldly declared, "Baptism ... now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 3:21). These and many other New Testament passages at least *seem* to indicate that baptism is much more than a symbol. In the language of the Bible, spiritual realities such as rebirth, renewal, forgiveness, salvation, and union with Christ are intimately associated with the rite of baptism.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* 27.2 acknowledges this biblical evidence in sacramental terms: "There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other." A

“sacramental union” exists between “the sign and the thing signified.” A mysterious union, a “spiritual relation” exists between baptism and grace so that “the names and effects” which the Scriptures use to speak of divine grace may also be attributed to the rite of baptism. When the Scriptures attribute “the names and effects” of God’s saving mercy to the rite of baptism, they speak in a sort of theological shorthand leaving the precise relationship mysterious or unexplained.

Reformed theology concurs with Scripture that there is more than meets the eye in the rite of baptism. Spiritual realities occur in conjunction with baptism, but the Scriptures do not explain in detail how baptism and divine grace are connected. So, Reformed theology speaks of the connection as a “sacramental (*i.e.* mysterious) union.” It is in this sense that Reformed theology rightly calls baptism a sacrament.

### *Separation of Baptism from Divine Grace*

On the other hand, Reformed theology understands the connection between baptism and grace in ways that distinguish it from those who identify divine grace too closely with the rite. In contrast with Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and a variety of Protestant churches which speak of baptismal regeneration or of the necessity of baptism for salvation, Reformed theology separates baptism from the bestowal of divine grace in certain respects.

To understand this dimension of Reformed theology, it helps to see how closely baptism is linked to the preaching of God’s Word.<sup>3</sup> Calvin, for example, identified two marks of the true church: the preaching of the Word of God, and the proper administration of the sacraments. In many respects, these two marks comprise two ways in which the Word of God comes to his people: the preached Word and the visible Word. Because of this close association, Reformed theology has consistently defined the sacramental significance of baptism in association with the preaching of the Word of God.

In Reformed theology, the preaching of the Word in the power of the Spirit is the primary means by which faith and salvation come to those whom God has chosen. No rite may serve this primary role. As Paul put it, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).

The *Belgic Confession* Article 33 explains, however, that the sacraments serve a secondary role in connection with the preaching of the Word:

[God] has added these [the Sacraments] to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our external senses both what he enables us

---

<sup>3</sup> See Wallace, Ronald, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1957).

to understand by his Word and what he does inwardly in our hearts, confirming in us the salvation he imparts to us.

The visible rite of baptism is added to the preaching of the Word in order to confirm what is preached and what we experience through the inward work of the Holy Spirit in connection with preaching. As Article 33 goes on to say, through this external confirmation, God “nourish[es] and sustain[s] our faith.”

The answer to *Heidelberg Catechism* Question 66 echoes this language, explaining that God ordained baptism in order to “make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel” and to “put his seal on that promise.” As *The Westminster Confession of Faith* 27.1 tells us, the sacraments “represent Christ, and His benefits” and “confirm our interest in Him.” It is in this sense that Reformed standards often speak of baptism as a “sign” and “seal” (BC 33; WCF 27.1; 28.1; WLC 162, 165; WSC 92, 94). As a sign, it visibly depicts the truth of the gospel, including among other things the blessings that come to those who exercise saving faith in the preached Word. As a seal, it confirms that saving grace is found only in Christ.

In the Reformed view, baptism does not normally convey spiritual benefits apart from the preaching and reception of the gospel. Rather, it increases our understanding of the preached Word; it nourishes and sustains us in our faith; and it confirms the benefits that come through saving faith in the preached Word. Reformed theology’s emphasis on God’s sovereignty and freedom leaves room for the sacraments to work in unexpected ways, but Scripture establishes the norm that the sacraments work in conjunction with the preaching of the Word.

Further, like the preaching of the Word, the sacraments do not guarantee that their recipients will receive the blessings they offer. In this regard, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 28.5 makes three denials that distinguish the Reformed view from those that too closely identify baptism and salvation: “grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto [baptism], as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it; or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.” First, baptism and “grace and salvation” are not utterly inseparable. Second, it is possible for a person to be regenerated or saved without baptism. Third, not everyone who is baptized is certainly regenerated.

Nevertheless, these denials are followed immediately by an affirmation of the “efficacy of Baptism,” but in terms of divine mystery. In *The Westminster Confession* 28:6 we read:

The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such ... as that

grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in His appointed time.

In the Reformed view, baptism is efficacious; divine grace is “really...conferred, by the Holy Ghost” through baptism. Even so, the *Confession* declares that this bestowal is mysterious because it is ordered entirely by the freely determined eternal counsel of God. Grace is conferred “according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.” The bestowal of salvation to those who have received the rite of baptism remains hidden in the mysteries of the divine counsel.

To sum up, Reformed theology holds that baptism is a sacrament and not a mere symbol. At the same time, it distinguishes itself from traditions which too closely associate the rite and divine grace.

### **Baptism as Covenantal**

A second major dimension the doctrine of baptism in the Reformed tradition is its covenantal character. The theology of covenant went through significant developments in the first centuries after the Reformation, but a fuller and enduring version appears in the Westminster standards.<sup>4</sup> In the theology of Westminster, “covenant” denotes the manner in which God condescends to human limitations. As *The Westminster Confession* puts it in 7.1,

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

Here “covenant” is a categorical term describing the full breadth of God's revelation of himself to humanity. In this broad sense, there is nothing in the Christian Faith that is not covenantal, defined in terms of God's revelation to humanity.

To understand how baptism relates to covenant, however, we must delve further into Westminster's theology. Divine condescension through covenant takes two basic forms. First, before the fall into sin, God entered into the “covenant of works” with humanity in Adam<sup>5</sup>; second, he entered into the

---

<sup>4</sup> See for instance: Vos, Geerhardus. “Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard J. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> The *Westminster Larger Catechism* Question 20 and *WSC* 12 refer to this as “a covenant of life.”

“covenant of grace” with humanity in Christ. As *The Westminster Confession* 7.2,3 put it,

The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam ... Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace.

The covenant of works applied to the relationship between God and humanity before sin; the covenant of grace was initiated immediately after the fall into sin, extending from that point in the Old Testament to the end of the New Testament. Reformed theology has understood the governing principle of both Testaments to be the grace of God in Christ. As *The Westminster Confession* puts it in 7.6: “There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.” Old Testament believers found salvation by placing their faith in the gospel of Christ to come; New Testament believers find salvation by placing their faith in the gospel of Christ who had come.

When Reformed theology speaks of baptism as covenantal, the sacrament is viewed in the context of the unity of the covenant of grace. The meaning of baptism is not found in the teachings of New Testament alone; it is also inferred from the manner in which baptism fulfills Old Testament patterns of faith. This reliance on the covenantal unity of the Old and New Testaments is stated in general terms when *The Westminster Confession* identifies the ordinances by which both the Old and New Testaments are administered. In the Old Testament the covenant of grace was “administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews” (7.5). Yet, “when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper” (7.6). Baptism administers the New Testament dispensation of the covenant of grace in ways that are analogous to the administration of the Old Testament dispensation of that same covenant.

A number of important aspects of the Reformed doctrine of baptism come to the foreground on the basis of the unity of the covenant of grace. We will mention four of these: initiation and continuation of life in covenant, external and internal conditions in covenant, visible and invisible communities of the covenant, and believers and their children in covenant.

### *Initiation and Continuation*

The fact that there are two sacraments ordained for the people of God in the New Testament age, draws attention to a set of parallels in the Old

Testament. Baptism correlates to circumcision, and the Lord's Supper corresponds to Passover.

It is evident from the gospels that the Lord's Supper is the fulfillment of the rite of Passover.<sup>6</sup> The Lord's Supper nourishes and sustains believers in their faith by repeated observances much like Passover aided the faithful in the Old Testament. Passover was a lasting ordinance for Israel; it was her way to remember, even to re-enact, the deliverance of the nation from slavery in Egypt. In much the same way, the Lord's Supper re-enacts Jesus' celebration of Passover with his disciples and reminds us of the significance of Christ's death and resurrection. In this sense, the Lord's Supper focuses on the continuation of life in covenant with God.

Reformed theologians and commentators typically focus on baptism as an initiation into covenant by pointing out a similar analogy between baptism and circumcision. As *The Belgic Confession* states: "Having abolished circumcision, which was done with blood, he established in its place the sacrament of baptism ... baptism does ... what circumcision did for the Jewish people" (Article 34).

This connection between circumcision and baptism is usually based on Colossians 2:11-12:

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

New Testament believers undergo "the circumcision done by Christ" as they are "buried with him in baptism."<sup>7</sup>

The book of Acts reveals that baptism replaced circumcision only through a complex process. The rite of baptism probably has its roots in temple washing ceremonies as they were expanded and applied in various ways in first century Judaism. Thus the mode of baptism in Reformed theology is largely a matter of indifference.<sup>8</sup> Christian baptism can be associated with the ritual washings that various sects of Judaism observed to distinguish themselves as the remnant of

---

<sup>6</sup> See Tenney, Merrill C. *The Gospel of John (The Expositor's Bible Commentary)*; Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), p. 135.)

<sup>7</sup> See Hendricksen, William, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon (New Testament Commentary)*; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1964), pp. 114-117.

<sup>8</sup> See: Murray, John, *Christian Baptism (Presbyterian and Reformed)*, 1980), pp. 6-30

Israel. It may also be associated with Jewish proselyte baptism.<sup>9</sup> As Gentiles began to fill the early church, the perpetuation of circumcision among Christians came into question. Christ himself apparently never taught on this question, leaving it to his apostles to determine the course of the church. In Acts 15, the Christian apostles determined that circumcision would no longer be required of New Testament believers, and that baptism alone would suffice as the initiatory rite for the Christian church.

In the Old Testament, circumcision was the rite of initiation into the covenant of grace. It was established in the days of Abraham as a perpetual ceremony (Gen 17:12). In fact, to fail to be circumcised was to violate the covenant offered to Israel (Gen 17:14).

Reformed theologians draw upon this Old Testament pattern and see baptism as an initiatory rite, such that those who receive baptism are initiated into covenant with God. This is why *The Westminster Confession* 28.1 speaks of baptism as “a sign and seal of the covenant of grace.”

#### *Internal and External Conditions*

Reformed theology also draws upon the analogy between circumcision and baptism to point out that saving faith is required of those who receive baptism. As with circumcision, baptism is not an end in itself. It serves as a visible reminder of the need for God’s covenant people to internalize their religion.

In the Old Testament inclusion in the covenant came about through physical circumcision, but the ideal for ancient Israelites was not that they merely be circumcised in their bodies. To receive eternal covenant blessings they were to be circumcised in their hearts. Moses expressed this ideal in Deuteronomy 10:12-16:

What does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees ... Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.

Circumcision of the heart was turning from stiff-necked resistance to the commands of God and committing to faithful living. We see the same language in Jeremiah 4:4:

---

<sup>9</sup> See Oepke, A. βαπτω (article in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), pp. 535ff.



Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done — burn with no one to quench it.

Physical circumcision expressed externally what was required to be true of the inner person. It called for a deeper commitment to life in the covenant, true repentance and wholehearted devotion to God and his ways.

In the same way, the New Testament insists that baptism is not merely an external sign. It not only initiates recipients into a covenant relationship with God, but calls for internalization. Those who receive baptism are to be washed, not only outwardly but inwardly as well. As Peter put it, “baptism ... now saves you also-- not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God” (1 Pet 3:21). Paul confirms this perspective, saying, “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism” (Col 2:11-12).

### *Visible and Invisible Communities*

Since initiation into covenant occurs through outward circumcision and calls those in covenant to inward circumcision, it follows that a division exists in the community of the covenant. Specifically, the covenant community actually consists of two communities: baptized believers and baptized unbelievers.

In Romans 2:28-29 Paul confirmed that there were two groups of people within the nation of Israel. He spoke of the one who is “a Jew ... outwardly [or visibly]” and one who is “a Jew ... inwardly [or invisibly],” and he concluded that “a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.” Paul distinguished between the visible and the invisible people of God in the Old Testament. The visible nation of Israel experienced many temporary blessings from God (Rom 9:4-5), but Abraham’s eternal inheritance was granted only to the invisible people of God, those who had the faith of Abraham (Rom 4:16; Gal 3:7-9).

*The Westminster Larger Catechism* extends Paul’s distinction between visible and invisible Israel to the New Testament age by speaking of the invisible and the visible church. The invisible church “consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ the Head” (WLC 64). The visible church, by contrast, is much larger, including all those who are outwardly a part of the church of Christ. It is “made up of all such as in all ages and places of the world do profess the true religion, and of their children” (WLC 62). This is why *The Westminster Confession* speaks of “the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church” (28.1). Baptism

unfailingly initiates people into the visible church, but it provides entry into the invisible church only for those who have saving faith.

Herein lies a vital distinctive of the Reformed doctrine of baptism. The distinction between the visible and invisible church expresses the belief that the visible covenant community of the New Testament remains a mixture of regenerate and unregenerate people who are baptized. A number of Christian traditions, however, appeal to the promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31 to deny this distinction between the visible and invisible church in the New Testament age. Jeremiah makes this promise about the New Covenant:

“I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jer. 31:33-34).

This passage indicates that internalization of faith and the granting of forgiveness for sin will be true of all who are counted as the people of God in the new covenant, but a vital qualification must be added. Although it is true that we are now in the age of the new covenant (Luke 22:20; 2Co 3:6; Heb 9:15; 12:24), it is also true that none of the promises of the new covenant have been completely fulfilled.<sup>10</sup> Even members of the new covenant are now threatened with eternal judgment (Heb 10:26-30). When Christ returns in glory, the visible church will be one and the same with the invisible church. But until that time, the new covenant has only been inaugurated. Right now, there are unbelievers in the visible church. Until the consummation of all things in Christ’s return, the distinction between the visible and invisible people of God remains.

### *Believers and Their Children*

A fourth way in which the unity of the covenant of grace informs the Reformed doctrine of baptism is with respect to the candidates for baptism. The Reformed position is that baptism should be applied both to those who profess faith in Christ and to their children. As the *Westminster Confession* puts it, “Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized” (28.4). The *Belgic Confession* reflects the same outlook: “We believe our children ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as little children were circumcised in Israel on the basis of the same promise made to our children” (Article 34).

---

<sup>10</sup> See Pratt, Richard L., Jr. “Infant Baptism in the New Covenant” (chapter in *The Case for Infant Baptism*; Gregg Strawbridge, ed.; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003), pp. 156-174.

This covenantal outlook on infant baptism distinguishes Reformed theology from many other traditions. Reformed churches do not baptize children to regenerate them or to remove the curse of original sin. Nor do Reformed churches baptize children simply to indicate the parents' dedication of the child to God. We baptize children to initiate them into covenant with God and to incorporate them into the visible church. As circumcision brought even infant boys into the visible nation of Israel, baptism brings children into the visible church.

Reformed commentators readily admit that the New Testament does not explicitly command or indisputably illustrate the baptism of children. The few references to household baptisms may have included children, but they are not explicit (Acts 10:44ff.; 16:13-15,30-34).

In all events, Reformed theology extends baptism to the children of believers for two main reasons. First, Paul summarized the significance of circumcision for Abraham in this way: "He received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (Rom 4:11). For Abraham as an adult, circumcision was a sign and seal of righteousness by faith. If we take this passage as the NIV translation suggests, circumcision signified and sealed the righteousness that Abraham himself had through faith as an adult. Even so, he was also commanded to circumcise his sons *before* they even had the opportunity to exercise faith (Gen. 17:12). In much the same way, baptism is rightly applied to adult converts after they profess faith, and rightly applied to their children even though these same children may not be capable of faith.

Second, every stage of the covenant of grace in the Old Testament (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David) gave special place to the progeny of believers as the expected — though not guaranteed — heirs of the covenant promises (Gen. 9:9; 15:18; 17:7; Deut. 7:9; Pss. 89:28-29; 132:11-12).

The theology exhibited in this Old Testament pattern explains several significant passages in the New Testament. For example, Jesus paid special attention to the children of those who followed him, laying his hands on them (Luke 18:15) to confer on them a covenant blessing (Mark 10:16). He also taught with reference to children that "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matt. 19:14), meaning that it belonged to the children who were brought to him and to others like them. It should not be surprising, then, that Peter announced a special place for the children of believers when he said, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). The order of priority is the same in the New Testament as it was in the Old. God's promises are first to believers, second to their children, and third to others who are far off. In a similar way, Paul argued for the sanctification of unbelieving spouses married to believers, noting that "otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy" (1 Cor. 7:14). In Paul's language, being "holy" or "sanctified" was equivalent to being part of the visible church (1 Cor. 1:2).

As B.B. Warfield summed up the matter,

God established His church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until He puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then members of His Church and as such entitled to its ordinances.<sup>11</sup>

So it is that the Reformed branch of the church baptizes not only adult converts, but also the children of believers.

The unity of the Scriptures expressed in the unity of the Covenant of Grace supplies a number of contours for the doctrine of baptism. Baptism initiates into the covenant, calls for internalization of the faith, distinguishes two communities among those who are baptized, and justifies the baptism of the children of believers. It is in these ways that Reformed theology speaks of baptism as covenantal.

The Reformed tradition shares many viewpoints on baptism in common with other branches of the church. There is “one faith, one Lord, one baptism” (Eph 4:5). Yet, Reformed theology also distinguishes itself from others as it formulates the manner in which baptism is sacramental and covenantal.

### *Practical issues*

*Should people be re-baptized upon profession of faith?* Reformed churches have strongly opposed re-baptizing anyone who has been baptized in the name of the Trinity. Questions are raised when anomalies occur. For example, if a person discovers that his or her parents were neither believing nor baptized. Such cases are handled with attention to the particular circumstances and desires of the person in question.

*Should the baptism of infants be required?* In the past, Reformed churches typically insisted that parents in membership have their children baptized. In recent decades a number of Reformed denominations have encouraged all to present their children for baptism, but only required that ordained officers of the church have their children baptized.

*Who is qualified to perform baptisms?* Although extraordinary circumstances may call for baptism to be performed by someone who is not ordained, Reformed churches have urged that only ordained ministers of the gospel perform baptisms under normal circumstances. This practice is usually supported by the apostle’s call that “everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Cor. 14:40). It is the responsibility of the minister to insure that baptism is performed in accordance with Scripture.

---

<sup>11</sup> B.B. Warfield, “The Polemics of Infant Baptism” in *Studies in Theology* (1932; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 9.408.

### Questions for Reflection

1. If the term “sacrament” is not a biblical term, then why is it used to describe baptism? What are the implications of the belief that the relation between baptism and grace is mysterious?
2. Why is it important to distinguish adequately between the rite of baptism and the reception of divine grace? Are there biblical examples that demonstrate this separation?
3. How can we justify drawing from patterns of Old Testament faith to elucidate patterns of New Testament faith? What analogies exist between the Passover and circumcision in the Old Testament, and the Lord’s Supper and baptism in the New Testament?
4. What is the difference between entry and life in the visible church and in the invisible church? Why is this distinction important for understanding baptism?
5. The New Covenant (New Testament) is predicted to be without unbelievers (Jer. 31:31-35). Why does the visible church still have baptized unbelievers within it?
6. If there are no New Testament passages that explicitly command or indisputably exemplify infant baptism, what implicit New Testament evidence is there to support the practice?