

POSITION PAPERS

15th General Assembly, 1987, Appendix P, p. 425-428.

MINORITY REPORT

Ad Hoc Committee to Study the Validity of Certain Baptisms

INTRODUCTION

The evident desire and determination of all the members of the ad hoc Study Committee to draw a clear line of separation between truth and untruth, or be it, between orthodoxy and heterodoxy/heresy, is both proper and praiseworthy. Because there is no question among us as to the flagrant apostasy of the Roman Catholic church, consideration of R.C. baptism gives us a test case for the principle involved in discerning what constitutes a valid baptism. By extension, these principles can be used in other cases.

BRIEF HISTORICAL COMMENT

A study of church history shows that a solid majority of Presbyterian churches and, almost without exception, all Reformed churches have held Roman Catholic baptism to be valid. Since the time of Thornwell, American Presbyterianism has largely tended to regard Roman Catholic baptism as invalid; prior to that time, however, most of American Presbyterianism was in harmony with other Reformed and Presbyterian bodies in this matter. The church has historically not rebaptized those who have fallen away from the faith, been excommunicated, and subsequently repented. Historically, the church has not required rebaptism for those who were baptized by ministers who subsequently proved to be apostate. More recently, the 1981 (159th) General Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod endorsed the validity of Roman Catholic baptism. In this, the Synod concurred with the vigorous and definitive dissent by Charles Hodge to the decision of the 1845 Assembly of the Presbyterian Church to declare Roman Catholic baptism invalid. (Hodge, "Validity of Romish Baptism" in *Church Polity*).

CONFESSITIONAL AND BIBLICAL CONSIDERATIONS: **Validity Versus Regularity of Propriety**

As helpful as Church history may be on this issue, it is to the Scriptures and to our subordinate standards to which we should principally look for direction. When we consider Biblical and Confessional teachings, we must give careful attention to the distinction which is central to resolution of this issue: whether a baptism is irregular or improper (a matter of regularity or propriety) and the related question of whether the baptism was valid or efficacious. Confusion of these two matters has made more difficult the resolution of this baptismal controversy. Specifically, in order to establish

that a certain baptism was invalid, it is not sufficient simply to demonstrate it to have been irregularly administered. For example, our Standards teach that a baptism administered by immersion is improper, yet valid. (*WCF* 28:3)

Consider the principles taught in Exodus 4:24-26, wherein God had started to kill Moses for his deliberate omission of the circumcising of his son. To prevent the Lord from slaying Moses, his wife Zipporah (a Midianitess) quickly administered the sacrament. This administration of circumcision was highly irregular, yet it was regarded by God as valid for immediately the Lord's wrath was turned away. In his Commentary on Exodus Calvin comments as follows:

Certainly the child was not duly (or regularly) circumcised; and still it is plain from the event, that the ceremony thus rashly performed, pleased God; for it is immediately added that 'He let him go'.

If the highly irregular circumcision performed by the unordained, female Midianitess Zipporah was valid, how much more so, felt Calvin, are the less irregular baptisms performed by the ordained, male priests of the Church of Rome. Despite the highly irregular nature of Romish baptism, Roman Catholic...

....children derive some benefit from baptism, when being engrafted into the body of the church, they are made an object of greater interest to the other members. Then, when they have grown up, they are thereby strongly urged to an earnest desire of serving God, Who has received them as sons by the formal symbol of adoption, before, from nonage, they were able to recognize Him as their Father..." (*Calvin, Institutes*, IV:16)

THE SIGN VERSUS THE THING SIGNIFIED

An additional complication en clarifying the issues involved has been the lack of care, at times, to differentiate between the sign (outwardly applied) of the sacrament and the thing signified (inwardly effected); *WCF* 27:2. In Calvin's expression, the sacrament is one thing, the power of the sacrament is another. It is God Himself who sovereignly applies the inward grace promised in the observance of the sacrament whose outward sign is applied to the recipient by the administrator, in accordance with Divine command (Larger Catechism 163). Neither the piety nor the intention of the administrator of the sacrament have a bearing on the validity of the sacrament; its efficacy depends exclusively upon the work of the Holy Spirit (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 27:3; 28:6,7; *LC* 161, 164, 176, and Scripture cited therein.) Although there is an intimate connection between the human action and the divine grace, so that one is not separate from the other, a sharp distinction must be recognized so that one is never merged into the other.

THE COUNCIL OF TRENT AND THE QUESTION OF APOSTASY BY THE CHURCH OF ROME

It has been argued by some that Calvin, and other Reformers were viewing a Roman Catholic Church not yet "officially" apostatized, and therefore could countenance their baptism as valid, though highly irregular. Some argue that until the Council of Trent, the Church of Rome was not apostate. The Council of Trent met from 1545 to 1563. It defined the Roman Catholic position on the sacraments en 1547. This was well before the final edition of the *Institutes* en 1559. Prior to Trent, Calvin and the

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other Reformers were fully aware of the departure from the faith by the Roman Catholic Church. They certainly did not await the outcome of the Council of Trent before pronouncing the judgment of God upon that Church's apostasy. It is clear that they recognized, even as we should also, that Trent did not change the Roman Catholic doctrine of baptism. It is therefore instructive to note Calvin's comments on the parallelism between the apostate Church of Rome and the apostate Israel:

As en ancient times, there remained among the Jews special privileges of a Church, so in the present day we do not deny to the Papists those vestiges of a church which the Lord has allowed to remain among them amid the dissipation ... Such, then, is the certainty and constancy of the divine goodness, that the covenant of the Lord continued there (among the Israelites) and His faith could not be obliterated by their perfidy; nor could circumcision be so profaned by their impure hands as not still to be a true sign and sacrament of His covenant. Hence, children who were born to them the Lord called His own (Ezekiel 16:20), though, unless by special blessing, they in no respect belonged to Him. So, having deposited His covenant in Gaul, Italy, Germany, Spain, and England, when these countries were oppressed by the tyranny of the (papal) Antichrist, He, in order that His covenant might remain inviolable, first preserved baptism there as an evidence of the covenant; baptism which, consecrated by His lips, retains its power in spite of human depravity." (*Institutes*, IV:2:11)

The priests and the people of Israel turned from serving the Lord unto idolatry and wantoness, so that the Lord removed Himself from them (Jeremiah; Ezekiel.) But God is true unto His own oath and His covenanted faithfulness is everlasting (Ezekiel 16:60ff).

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS AND THE QUESTION OF THE WORTHY ADMINISTRATOR

It is on the grounds of God's faithfulness that Calvin affirms,

...Moreover, if we have rightly determined that a sacrament is not to be estimated by the hand of him by whom it is administered, but is to be received as from the hand of God Himself, from Whom it undoubtedly proceeded, we may hence infer that its dignity neither gains nor loses by the administrator... This confutes the error of the Donatists, who measured the efficacy and worth of the sacrament by the dignity of the minister. Such in the present day are our catabaptists (rebaptizers) who deny that we are duly baptized, because we were baptized in the Papacy by wicked men and idolaters; hence, they furiously insist on anabaptism (rebaptism). Against these absurdities we shall be sufficiently fortified if we reflect that by baptism we were initiated not into the name of any man, but into the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and, therefore, that baptism is not of man, but of God, by whomsoever it may have been administered. (*Institutes*, 1559 edition, IV: 15:16-17)

To say that Calvin regarded Roman Catholic baptism (or certain other baptisms) as valid is not to say that he thought such baptisms should have been administered or that they were proper baptisms. But it was his view that once administered, the baptism was valid and irrepeatable, even if highly irregular. This is also the position of Augustine who did battle with the Donatists. This sect tended to identify the invisible church (the elect) with the visible church (a mixed multitude); an imperfect church was no church at all; and the loss of personal perfection by a minister invalidated any sacraments administered by him. To the Donatists Augustine replied, "Baptism belongs

to Christ, regardless of who may give (administer) it." (A. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, Chicago, 1971, Vol. I, p. 311)

THE CHURCH DETERMINES THE VALIDITY OR PROPRIETY OF BAPTISMS

Whereas God alone determines the efficacy (inward, spiritual grace) signified by the outward signs, it is the Church itself which must ministerially determine the validity and regularity or propriety of baptisms, in the same manner as it determines the validity (credibility) of professions of faith of those seeking membership in the Church. For, it was to the Church itself that Christ assigned the authority of the keys of the Kingdom and the responsibility of carrying out His Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). As the report of the 159th General Synod of the RPCES correctly observed, the church thus extends or withholds the sacraments in its declaratory and ministerial capacity as the God-appointed pillar and foundation of God's truth (1 Tim. 3:15). The Church ministerially declares administration of the sacraments to be valid (or, invalid) on the basis of the presence (or absence) of outward, discernible elements which constitute the criteria for validity (*Larger Catechism* 163). It is not, therefore, the prerogative of individuals within the church, nor of recipients of the sacrament to declare a baptism to be valid or invalid.

CRITERIA OF VALIDITY AND CRITERIA OF REGULARITY

However helpful and informative it may be to consider historical instances in the Scriptures, it is principally to explicit, verbal instructions that we must look in order to establish Biblical criteria. As a confessional church, we seek guidance from the Confessional Standards as reliable summaries of that which the Scriptures teach. The following criteria are determinative of validity, and must therefore be present in the administration of baptism: (By their very nature, extraordinary cases are those which do not follow the rule, but our concern is to set forth which criteria are those which Scripture specifies).

1. Administered in the most Holy Name of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19; *WCF* 2:3). This formula may be expressed occasionally in the name of Christ Jesus as mediatorial representative of the Trinity (for example, Acts 2:38).
2. With water (Matt. 3:11; 28:19; John 1:33; 3:5; *LC* 177). It may be noted that application of oil as symbolic of the Spirit is exemplified in Scripture.
3. Unto those who profess faith in, and obedience unto, Christ; or unto children of those professing faith in Christ. (Gen. 17:7-9; Acts 2:31-39; 1 Cor. 7:14; *LC* 155; *WCF* 28:4, 14:1,2, and especially 14:3 with regard to the nature of the faith required.)
4. Administered by a lawfully ordained minister of the Gospel (*WCF* 27:4; 1 Cor. 4:1; 11:23; Heb. 5:4; Rom. 15:8.).

Besides these essential criteria which determine the validity of the baptism, other conditions should be met for the baptism to be regarded as proper or regular. Although not exhaustive, the following list include those elements which should be present in the administration of baptism for it to be regarded as regular or proper:

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1. Within the bounds of a body bearing the marks of a true church of Jesus Christ. (Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 1:2; 12:12-13; Eph. 4:11-13)
2. By sprinkling or pouring. (Isaiah 52:15; Acts 2:17; Eph. 5:26; Hebrews 9:18-23; 10:22; 12:24; WCF 28:3)

THE BURDEN OF INVESTIGATING PREVIOUS BAPTISMS

A session which wishes to carry out its God-given responsibilities with sensitivity and conscientiousness may find the task of investigating previous baptisms a heavy and, at times, an impracticable one. As noted in the aforementioned report adopted by the 159th General Synod of the RPCES, "The process of investigation through the dim past, searching out such things as faith or the lack of it in deceased priest or parents, will convince one that only God knows the heart. Dr. Buswell wisely wrote ... 'The value of participation depends wholly upon its institution by Christ, and not in the slightest degree upon the human channel by which it is administered.' If we are not careful, none of us will know for sure if we have been baptized. Likewise, if our salvation rested on the quality of our faith rather than faith's perfect object, we could not truly know if we are saved ... God has not left us in such confusing positions. We can know we are saved and we can know we are baptized." Recognizing that the Church of Rome is no true Church, yet the RPCES report continued:

If a baptism comes from within a Christian tradition where the Trinity is understood and Jesus is accepted as the One Who came in the flesh and where He is designated the Savior, we urge acceptance of that baptism as valid. Thus, we reject outrightly the baptism of cults who stand outside the stream of catholic history. There is a distinct difference between contrived imitations and Roman distortions ... We express our firm outrage that so many of its (Roman Catholic) communicants have been taught to trust in the sacraments themselves and to give lip-service to the atoning sacrifice of the Savior. The truth of God has been slighted, but the enemy of God has not had a thorough victory.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Assembly receive both the Committee and the Minority Reports, commending them to the attention of its churches and lower courts as information.
2. That the Assembly leave decisions in these matters to be made, on a case by case basis, by the lower courts, subject to normal review and control or judicial processes.
3. That the Assembly discharge the Committee with thanks.

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