

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM*

by *Cornelis Trimp*

Translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman

The Need for Continuing Reflection

MORE THAN ONE justification exists for a meaningful reconsideration of the content of the Reformed doctrine of baptism. A primary argument in this connection is that the character of the church's creeds requires such a reconsideration. By this we mean that we need to think through the faith of the church set forth in the Confessions, doing so on the basis of the Word of God and with an eye to issues both old and new. To suppose that loyalty to confessional formulations relieves us of this duty is to treat the Confessions like an immovable monument; it is to exterminate that very life born of faith in the God of the living and abiding Word.

In this context we must be aware that the church's doctrine of baptism contains and discloses weighty choices relating to the whole of Christian living before God in the church. Baptism is the front door to the church. Did our ancestors capture the true meaning of this baptism when they characterized it as "sign" and "seal" of God's promise and as "sign of the covenant," and when they proceeded from that perspective to describe the meaning of

*This essay comprises Section II of *Woord, water en wijn. Gedachten over prediking, doop en avondmaal*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1989), 31-72. Dr. Trimp's title for this section is simply "De doop" ("Baptism"); the English title above this translation is entirely the translator's invention.

baptism in, for example, Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 26 and 27?

Another stimulus for this reconsideration is the matter of the *institution* of baptism. The Reformed Confessions strongly emphasize that Christ himself instituted baptism, according to Matthew 28:19 (Heidelberg Catechism, *A*. 71). For the churches of the Reformation, this institution comprised the decisive argument against the seven-sacrament system of the Roman Catholic Church (Heidelberg Catechism, *Q/A* 68).

However, numerous contemporary analyses vigorously contest this institution of an ecclesiastical baptismal ritual. For example, Hendrikus Berkhof characterizes this argument as a kind of biblicism, and calls any attempt to derive baptism from the will of Christ himself a "fiction." Baptism, in his view, resulted from human faith-experience, which after Pentecost sought expression in a ritual of immersion and resurrection.¹

Similarly, the *Faith and Order* declaration dealing with baptism, eucharist, and ministry (the *Lima Declaration*), makes every effort to avoid registering a decision about this matter of the institution of baptism. This contrasts remarkably with the preliminary formulation that had been developed a few years earlier, in 1974 (the *Accra Declaration*).²

This denial of the "Christian" institution of baptism is related to various issues. Proceeding from this denial, Berkhof not only rejects the whole idea of sacrament as such, but also comes up with a loose constellation of enduring "traditions" dominant in the early church, of which baptism (he calls it "the washing") constituted one of the "pointers" among those factors belonging to participating in the "covenantal encounter."³ The phrase "*covenant encounter*," so characteristic of Berkhof's theological approach, leads us to inquire once more into the meaning and significance of the "covenant" in connection with baptism. Here we come to the pointed realization that

¹Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, trans. by Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 348, 353, 389.

²The official title of the Lima Declaration is *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva 1982, Faith and Order Paper no. 111).

³Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 350-356, 388-392.

simply holding on to the word “covenant” cannot decide the issue. After all, an old word can carry new cargo.

Whereas the Lima Declaration paid little attention to the matter of the covenant,⁴ we are struck all the more by attempts within Dutch theology to hang on to this notion. For example, the ecumenical report on baptism of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands emphasized the “covenant context” when it described the significance of baptism. Baptism is characterized as an encounter between God in Christ, the recipient, and the church. The “covenantal context” is explained to mean that baptism manifests God’s will for all people and nations. That will is oriented toward the well-being and salvation of the whole world, because it is God’s covenant will to be together with humanity. This will has been established once for all in Christ. Through baptism a person gratefully receives the work of God in Christ and joyfully accepts that this work is imparted to him.⁵ We are dealing here with a very particular view of God’s covenant and the divine will. This particularly Dutch tone of “ecumenical” reflection about baptism requires us all the more to reconsider our ancient catechism formulations.

This issue of the institution of baptism also involves the cherished characterization of baptism as an expression of *solidarity* with humanity.⁶ This view opposes the idea that baptism would differentiate its recipients from unbelievers and would constitute a visible demonstration of the antithesis. In order to ground the notion of solidarity in the doctrine of baptism, people prefer to go back to Jesus’ baptism by John, since that was a baptism of solidarity that we who would follow Jesus must imitate.

The sixteenth-century struggle about *infant baptism* seems to be recurring with increasing intensity in our generation. For we

⁴The only mention occurs in I.1, where baptism is called “entry into the New Covenant.”

⁵*Archief van de kerken* 32 (1977): 363ff.

⁶Cf. W. G. Overbosch, “Doopsbediening als liturgische didachè,” *Liturgische handreiking*, vol. 1 (’s-Gravenhage, 1967), 2-32, and vol. 2 (’s-Gravenhage, 1975), 4-26, 65, 66; H. Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 352, 354; K. Blei, *De kinderdoop in discussie* (Kampen, 1981), 33ff., 39, 88, 162; M. Ferrel, in *Praktisch Theologisches Handbuch*, ed. by G. Otto, 2nd edition (Hamburg, 1975), 565ff.

are hearing assurances from various quarters that adult baptism and infant baptism are at least “equally valid alternatives.”⁷

That children of believers “ought to be baptized,” as stated in the first question of the historic Reformed liturgical Form for the Baptism of Infants, is dismissed as improperly excessive. In fact, the reasoning used in the past by Anabaptists is finding greater currency, even though many want to limit the radicalism of these Anabaptists by maintaining infant baptism as a meaningful opportunity for pastoral care.

In this reasoning the strong influence of Karl Barth is coming to expression in a specifically Dutch context. For Barth concluded his imposing *Church Dogmatics* in 1967 with an extensive treatise opposing the legitimacy of infant baptism. For him, a “water baptism” is acceptable only as the recipient’s act of confession in response to the “Spirit baptism” that God has wrought.⁸

In the Netherlands we have really never known what to do with this Barthian radicalism, but as a minimum it has resulted in the thorough erosion of the conviction that children “ought to be baptized.”

In addition to Barth’s influence, we should consider other factors responsible for the increasing influence of Anabaptist anti-paedobaptist reasoning. We are thinking especially of the *struggle against the national church concept* arising from the realization that the church lives in a world growing increasingly hostile

⁷Cf. the Lima Declaration on baptism, 12 (Commentary).

⁸We are dealing here not with an appendix to Barth’s dogmatics or with an element totally foreign to the whole of his theology. This view of baptism is a direct result of Barth’s “Christological focus” and of his congregationalist opposition to “office” and “means of grace.” Cf. K. Blei, *De kinderdoop in discussie*, 106-109; E. Jüngel, *Karl Barths Lehre von der Taufe. Ein Hinweis auf ihre Probleme* (Zürich, 1968); W. Kreck, “Karl Barths Tauflehre,” *Zu Karl Barths Lehre von der Taufe*, ed. by F. Viering, 2nd ed. (Gütersloh, 1972), 11ff.; W. Kreck, “Karl Barths Tauflehre,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 94 (1969), col. 401ff.; R.H. Bremmer, “Karl Barth en de kinderdoop,” *Rondom de doopvont. Leer en gebruik van de heilige doop in het Nieuwe Testament en in de geschiedenis van de westerse kerk*, ed. by W. van ’t Spijker (Goudriaan, 1983), 497ff.; K. Aland, *Taufe und Kindertaufe* (Gütersloh, 1971), 40ff.

toward the church—a situation comparable to that of the first centuries of the early church.

Moreover, our age is marked by a heavy emphasis on *human religiosity* and on the human experience of faith. Given this emphasis, it is easy to understand why people prefer to enjoy baptism as a milestone experience in the Christian life.

Finally, we should note the modern emphasis on *human freedom* and on human choice. When one moves consistently from the starting point of freedom and self-determination, then a phenomenon like infant baptism is quickly disqualified as the patriarchal, oppressive manipulation of a free human being.⁹ Baptism must be a person's free choice, so that a person may function as a full-fledged partner in the encounter. Here lies a link to fashionable theories about the "relational" character of our "encounter" with God, theories that belong to the doctrine of revelation. These theories insist that God and humanity need one other and cannot reach their potential without one another.¹⁰

This preliminary survey will suffice for now. The directions we have signaled in this opening section convince us more than ever of the need to reflect again in our own generation about the doctrine of baptism.

Baptism according to the New Testament

Scriptural Data

1. Baptism has its own simple sign language: to baptize is to wash, to cleanse with water. No matter how baptism might be

⁹Cf. K. Blei, *De kinderdoop in discussie*, 16-17, for a discussion of various motives for rejecting infant baptism.

¹⁰"When God and humanity interact together by way of a covenant, this means that the reality of God and the reality of humanity are so intimately related that the one cannot reach its full potential without the other. This intimate interaction becomes visible in a history, in the way God deals with people, whereby through a process of learning, the personal history of an individual is taken up into the history of salvation which leads to the renewal of humanity and the world" (G. Heitink, *Pastoraat als hulpverlening. Inleiding in de pastorale theologie en psychologie* [Kampen, 1977], 15).

administered (immersion, pouring, sprinkling), a *washing away* always occurs. In the New Testament the administration is described and qualified in various ways, but this simple core of the event remains visible. At this point we are not discussing various baptisms, for example, in the circle of the Jews (proselyte baptism) or in the work of John the Baptizer. We are talking about Christian baptism, and we have in mind that baptism instituted by Christ himself, described in Matthew 28:19.

In the context of the narrative about Christ's resurrection, Scripture tells us that Christ gave his disciples a mandate to make all the nations his disciples. This colossal expansion of his circle of disciples is to be effectuated by *baptizing* and *teaching* the nations, as the text states explicitly.

Moreover, this baptism is further qualified with the addition: "*in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.*" We will discuss this later. For now, we wish merely to observe that Christ himself has instituted Christian baptism and has made this baptism the exclusive international entrance into the church of his disciples. Only through baptism does one enter the circle of disciples.

We would observe, further, that connected with this baptism is the church's continuing instruction in the teaching of Christ, with a view to preserving his commandments.

This washing as a purification by means of water Christ himself has determined to be adequate and necessary for all nations in the context of his grand work during the period of his exaltation (Matt. 28:18), his grand work of bringing the nations into fellowship with himself.

2. This "washing" points to an intervention in a person's life. A person who has become dirty can, through and after this washing away, go on living now as a clean person. Water represents a *breach*. The way you start out differs from the way you arrive at your destination. Therefore, it is obvious why the New Testament connects Christian baptism with the purification of human living. We stand before our Creator as filthy people. But we may go on living as those who have been cleansed. At the breach there lies for us a brand new future, opened by him who

desired to become our Deliverer and who has earned for us this new mode of existence.

The reader will understand that we are now speaking of that *cleansing from sins* whereby our life is wrested from the grip of God's wrath and transferred into the light of God's love and goodness. God does not shackle us to our past, but in forgiving our sins he opens up a new, unimagined future. That future is fashioned by God himself and will disclose to us more and more the depth of his love in Christ.

This glorious breach that occurs within lost human life is what baptism speaks about. This is what we learn from passages like 1 Corinthians 6:11 and Ephesians 5:26 (see also 2 Pet. 1:9 and Heb. 10:22). The man who wrote these words knew all too well from his own experience what Christian baptism meant; that had definitely been his deepest life-experience. The living Christ had cast him down and with great force had arrested him along the road of his legalistic zeal against Christ and his church. At this very moment, Paul's plan for his own life was finished. At this very moment, a reality dawned about which Paul would later write: "It is not longer I who live" (Gal. 2:20).

After Paul had been knocked off his feet and forcibly freed from his past by the mighty power of the exalted Christ, this very same Christ opened up a future for this powerless man (see Acts 9:15-16). For Paul, it was baptism that opened the door to this future. For baptism is cleansing from sins, release from one's former existence, opening up life with Christ for God. "And he got up and was baptized" (Acts 9:18b; see 22:16).

3. These last-mentioned texts show that baptism was not a silent ritual. The *name of Christ* was employed in connection with baptism. This occurred in two possible ways. The person being baptized openly acknowledged his faith in Christ and publicly confessed that from that moment, his life was impossible apart from Christ (see again Gal. 2:20). This is certainly intended in Acts 22:16. The second possibility is that the name of Christ was pronounced upon the one being baptized. From that moment Christ was the owner of this life, and this life was determined entirely by him (cf. also Acts 2:38, 10:48, and 19:5). From that

moment “calling on the name” would characterize these disciples of Christ (cf. Acts 9:14, 21; 1 Cor. 1:2; James 2:7).¹¹ In many cases both possibilities seem clearly evident. This involves Christ’s lordship over life, a lordship proclaimed and acknowledged at baptism. From that time forward, Christ is the “life context” (Gal. 3:27). Baptism marks the changing of the guard, the transfer of its recipient to living under the authority of Christ after living under the lordship of an other, evil power.

4. This life, which from that point forward would be a living for God and with Christ, is simultaneously a living *by the Spirit*. How could someone live under Christ’s lordship without living under the regime of Christ’s Spirit? Romans 8 provides us an impressive description of this Spirit of Christ. Apart from him this new life is unimaginable. Therefore we should not be surprised when the New Testament tells us that baptism is the instrument whereby the Spirit of Christ is bestowed upon new disciples. This is what we learn from passages like Acts 2:38, Acts 19:1-6, and 1 Corinthians 12:13.

The particular events in Samaria and Caesarea, narrated in Acts 8:14-17 and 10:44-48, cannot cast doubt upon the correctness of our observation. Especially in view of the patterns advocated by various charismatic movements and Pentecostal groups, it is significant to observe carefully the direct relationship between baptism and the Holy Spirit, and not to allow this observation to be undermined by the course of events narrated in Acts 8 and 10. Both chapters describe for us some prominent intersections along the route of salvation history, and they do not provide us with a model for God’s administration in terms of the individual life-experience of believers.

Obviously we have reached an appropriate point for a broader discussion of this matter of “bestowing the Holy Spirit,” especially in terms of the testimony of the book of Acts. But we must forego such an exercise, in view of the scope of this essay. The same is true for an evaluation of the significance of Titus 3:5 in this context.

¹¹For this reason, we cannot understand why H. Berkhof alleges that the attention shown in the NT to baptism is “rather marginal” (*Christian Faith*, 353).

5. Through baptism the recipient is included in the fellowship of Christ's disciples called the *church*. Baptism is a public incorporation into the church.

Therefore, it is an abstraction to view baptism as an individual experience, since "by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13a).

Life from that moment is life in Christ and in the church of Christ. Being "in Christ" cannot be isolated from being "in the church." When life is cleansed, it is purified for sincere love of the brothers (1 Pet. 1:22). From this point on, Christ and his church constitute the new context for our living.

6. The apostle Paul has unfolded for us the Spirit's profound thoughts about the significance of baptism in Romans 6, especially verses 3-5:

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of his death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of his resurrection. . . .

Careful reading of this passage teaches us that the apostle summons the church to recall the insight she had already received earlier ("Or do you not know. . .?").

The apostle appeals to the church's knowledge about baptism in the context of his instruction regarding the new life of the Christian.

According to Romans 6:1-2, Paul desires to expose the absolute absurdity of believers—the people of "Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5:21)—"continuing in sin." Romans 6:2b states, short and to the point, that "we have died to sin." A deep and definitive break has been created between sin and us. After all, what break is deeper and more definitive than death? What thinking person would ever imagine that after the moment of death, someone could function even one second longer in terms of former

relationships? In this connection the apostle discusses baptism in Romans 6:3.

Two questions arise for us: (1) What is meant in 6:2 by “having died to sin”? and (2) What does baptism have to do with this?

To the first question, we would reply as follows. We are convinced that in 6:2 the apostle is not giving us a description of the progress which believers have made along the road of conversion. For no matter how genuinely this conversion is demonstrated in their living, the “definitive *having died* to sin” is too radical to apply to the “condition” of any Christian in this dispensation. Therefore, we must understand 6:2 as describing the “status” (judicial position) in which believers are placed by God himself.

The following verses make this apostolic intention clear. He speaks of “having died with Christ” (v. 8) and of having been “crucified with him” (v. 6). Thus those who have “died” have by rights been freed from sin (v. 7). This dying is the “parable” of Christ’s death (v. 5)—an expression which protects the uniqueness of Christ’s death, while at the same time connecting our dying, which Paul has in view, as closely as possible with the dying of Christ.

When did this “dying with Christ” occur? The most obvious answer is: At the moment when Christ was crucified on Golgotha. At that time we were crucified, we-with-him. The cross of Christ is the preeminent breaking point for all ages and all generations.

During his life on earth, Christ did not pursue his own interests; he did not surrender himself to death for his own sake (Rom. 4:25). He stood as second Adam at the head of a completely new humanity; everything that happened to him, happened to and for all who belong to him. That was the message Paul had given in Romans 5:12-21. Christ’s dying signified the end of the lordship (the “kingship”) of sin and death introduced by Adam’s guilt (cf. Rom. 5:14, 17, 21; 6:9, 12, 14, 16ff.). That dominion had fully and completely “spent itself” against the Christ. Christ bore upon himself all sin, and he bore upon himself God’s wrath against sin. But in so doing he never became the slave of

sin. He did not fuel the fire of death by his own sin, but he let that fire rage through his own body and in his own flesh he let that fire burn itself out. This is how the vanquished man of Golgotha became victor over the power of sin (the triumph of Christ on the cross, cf. Col. 2:14-15). He loved his God unto death, and bore the wrath of God to the end. Therefore, at that moment the *lordship* of sin's deadly power was finished. And on Easter morning, living for God became the future of the world. This course of events make Christ's cross the intersection—the crossing—of world history and of many, many personal life histories. Christ made the route of serving sin a dead-end road, and inaugurated living for God as the new way for humanity.

Those unimaginable events transpired between God and our Surety and Mediator. The central moment of that ransom was even hidden from all human view (Matt. 27:45-46).

Nevertheless, we were not absent on that Good Friday and on that day of Easter. Just as the people of Israel were not absent in the solitary procession of the high priest on the great day of atonement—for he carried the people over his heart (cf. Exod. 28:29-30 and Lev. 16)—so too we were present in a special way on the great day of ransom at Golgotha. Christ knew what he was sent to accomplish; he had come to atone for the sin of the people (Heb. 2:17) and in doing so, he knew us. We were in his heart, for his Father, who had sent him, had given us to him (cf. John 6:37, 39; 17:2, 6ff., 24; Canons of Dort, 1.7). Thus, in a particular way we were “in” him and “with” him. The “we in him” and “he for us” of Romans 5 appear to be the basis of the “we with him” in Romans 6 and of the “he in us” of Romans 8. The fact that this presence surpasses our human understanding does not diminish its reality. We are speaking here of a decision of God, a prior pre-determination that encompasses all our lives. In the language of the Bible and the church we could call this decision God's “eternal love” or God's “election.” It constitutes the incontrovertible message of the Bible: salvation history is the realization of God's salvation decision, and this salvation history becomes the story of our lives. There was a day when Christ sank down into the deep ravine of divine desertion. That was when he sank down into the chasm between the two dispensations, the one marked by the lordship of sin leading to death, the other marked by righteousness leading to life. When Christ sank down into that gorge, we sank down with him. We-with-him—by virtue of the decision of God. Two human modes of existence were torn asunder: living for sin and living for God. We died then to sin, we-

with-him, that we might rise with him for God.¹² Christ became partaker of us, so that we could become partakers of him (Heb. 2:14, 3:14).

The apostle takes us back to these events as he aims to show the absolute impossibility of living in sin.

Here someone might ask: Are we not, in this context, able or even required to focus attention on the personal history of the Christian believer? May we not argue on the basis of the fact that a person has chosen for Christ and at that time promised to live as a Christian before God's face?

This question must undoubtedly be answered affirmatively; Romans 6 justifies such an answer, especially verses 17-23. But first we must acknowledge (notice v. 11) that through fellowship with Christ ("in Christ Jesus") we *are* dead to sin. That fact is the deepest basis for the appeal that we *become* more and more dead to sin.

Further, we need to investigate the function in this context of verses 3-4, which recall *baptism*. Within human personal history, baptism is an unforgettable moment for everyone, whether Jew or Gentile, who has been called by the preaching of the gospel. For in that baptism, a person is publicly and definitively brought into fellowship with Christ. One's personal history is, once and for all, put above the "denominator" of God's salvation history in Christ. Never again can the story of one's personal history be told without mentioning the name and work of Christ, without narrating the course of Christ's life and death. If ever an event can be called an "intervention," surely it is the event of being baptized!

Fellowship with Christ is unimaginable apart from the crucified Christ, for it is a fellowship with the one who gave himself over to death and was banished from human society into the silent grave. It is primarily that event of Good Friday which is established through baptism and which, through baptism, penetrates our personal history.

¹²We were also present on the day of ascension and since then, in glory (cf. Eph. 2:5-6 and Col. 2:12, 3:1ff.).

This happens also through the *preaching* of the crucified Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23, 2:2, Gal. 3:1, 6:14). But on the day of baptism this preaching is being publicly and definitively accepted (“*Jesus is Lord!*,” cf. Rom. 10:9) and fellowship with Christ is being definitively marked and guaranteed in baptism.

Although in this way baptism itself represents a particular ending point, it can at the same time be presented as a starting point, because “being baptized” functions as the decisive moment in which a person publicly and definitively enters into fellowship with God and his people. This feature permits us to compare baptism to one’s wedding day, which surely functions as an ending point, but primarily as a beginning.

The person who is baptized is submerged in the death of Christ—as a ship perishes beneath the waves.¹³ This is how radically one’s fellowship with the Christ who has died puts an end to one’s former existence (the “old man”). Precisely this state of affairs grants such decisive power to the apostle’s reference to the moment of baptism.

That power is further strengthened by the fact that Christ’s death and burial were followed by his resurrection. In the same way the break with the former life can have no other scope than living for God in newness, which Christ gives to that life (cf. v. 4b). The “shall” of verses 5 and 8 involve primarily the *intention* and the *aim* and not merely “future” events. However, we have space only to mention these aspects.

¹³With this imagery we are trying to echo the original meaning of the word “baptize” (βάπτω or βαπτίζω), namely, to submerge. One who is “baptized” is held under water. A “baptized” ship is a ship that has sunk (cf. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967], s.v. βάπτω κ.τ.λ., 529-530, for this and similar examples). We rarely find this original meaning of the word in the New Testament (Luke 16:24, John 13:26, and Rev. 19:13 provide us a few examples of this meaning). In the New Testament the word is used to refer to actions associated with cultic, ritual washing (e.g., Mark 7:4 and Heb. 9:10). On the basis of this meaning we arrived at the typically Christian use of the word (βάπτισμα as *baptism*) rendered as “washing.” But it is meaningful in connection with Romans 6 to recall the most original use of the word, to sound a faint echo of the radical character of *baptism* as *undergoing death*.

This is how the truth of salvation history becomes fact within our personal history: *we* have died and risen with Christ. In this way baptism lays the basis for the sanctification of life as a living with Christ. For this Christ wants to dwell in us by the power of the Spirit. *We-with-him* and *he-in-us*: that is the fellowship which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit desire. Baptism speaks of this fellowship. Baptism anchors our course of life in the course of Christ's dying and living, and conveys the salvation history of the triune God into our personal history.

7. With this analysis we have uncovered the meaning of the words of institution in Matthew 28:19. Here we encounter the full name of our God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The exalted Christ himself reveals this name in connection with the baptism of the nations. We find no indication whatsoever in the text itself that would compel us to consider this a later formulation that, as it were, would have been put on Christ's lips by Matthew.

The expression "*in the name of*" provides a characterization of the act of baptizing. Not the mandate to baptize, but the nature of baptism is being identified. To say it with an old-fashioned phrase, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the three persons of the one God—constitute the "intended goal" of this baptism.¹⁴ The nations must be brought near to the triune God who has revealed himself so gloriously in Christ. Christ has completed his work upon earth. His going to the cross and his rising from the grave are the great realities of his life, one great effort for the life of the world. When the disciples would soon "go out" and expand Christ's salvation beyond the borders of the Jewish land, then in correspondence with the Father's promise, the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon them through Christ (cf. Luke 24:47-49).

Thus here in this text we encounter the *Father*, who for the sake of his own sent Christ in humiliation in order thereafter in his exaltation to grant to him great glory and authority (Matt. 28:18).

¹⁴I have written more extensively about this in *De gemeente en haar liturgie* (Kampen 1983), 193-198.

In this text we encounter the *Son*, who from the moment of *his* baptism (Matt. 3:13-17) voluntarily embarked upon the public path of his official ministry and had only recently in his resurrection been manifested as God's-Son-in-power in such a magnificent way (cf. Rom. 1:4).

In this text we encounter the *Holy Spirit*, the great gift of the end time. Christ has obtained the gift of the Spirit for his people and would distribute this gift in the very near future (cf. Acts 2:33). Through this Spirit it would be possible for many nations to be incorporated into fellowship with Christ. Thus the exalted Christ speaks about the power and the riches of the triune God, in whose fellowship the nations may live from now on. Baptism would mark this fellowship, as often as the name of the recipient and the full name of God would be bound together in the one baptism formula. From now on a person may be incorporated into fellowship with God and bear a baptismal name.

This conclusion of Matthew's gospel narrative constitutes a complete unity with its beginning. We see Jesus in his royal glory (Matt. 28:18). *He is the son of David.*

This son of David employs his royal authority to bless the nations with the gift of living fellowship with God (v. 19) according to the promise of Genesis 12:3 and 22:18. *He is the son of Abraham.*

The setting-apart narrated in Genesis 12 has reached its goal. The centripetal force of the Old Testament now becomes the centrifugal force of the ever-widening message of the apostles. Jerusalem is the axis for both. To Jerusalem Christ traveled to offer the solitary sacrifice of his life. From Jerusalem the light dawns for the nations. If Jerusalem is the axis, the world is the sweep. Toward the farthest boundaries of that world the exalted Christ is traveling, until the end (v. 20): he is Immanuel (1:23). That is the narrative of the "genesis" of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham (1:1). If you want to think deeply about baptism, you will have to do that in the light of this first word in the New Testament.

Summary and Preliminary Conclusions

As we review our exploration of a number of Scriptural details, several matters stand out, which we wish to organize into four concluding remarks.

1. In the texts we have considered, Christian baptism appears to be an instrument in God's hands. He is the one who works upon us through baptism. He does that through Christ and through the Spirit (e.g., see Eph. 5:26, 1 Cor. 12:13a, Titus 3:5).

There is no indication that baptism fills a human need or expresses human sentiments. God himself maintains baptism as his tool. In doing so, he surpasses by far anything we might feel or think. In baptism he constructs a relationship that in his love he craved for centuries already. In the reality of our earthly existence he gives shape to the love he has for us long before our conversion, yes, long before the beginning of the history of our lives and of this world (cf. Rom. 5:8 and Eph. 1:4).

2. Anyone seeking an "objective definition" of baptism searches the New Testament in vain. Foundational to understanding the nature of baptism is the Scripture's talk about being included in Christ. All that talk has the tone and vocabulary of faith-language. Apparently any other language is impossible.

Certainly in the texts we have discussed, baptism comes to us as the baptism of believers. It is inconceivable that anyone was ever baptized by the apostles against his will. Baptism is required, but at the same time it must be desired in faith, as the narrative of Acts 2:38-41 indicates.

Precisely for that reason we should be deeply impressed by the fact that the New Testament appears quite uninterested in the *experience* of the recipient of baptism. Not the experience of the recipient of baptism, but the decision of God determines the scope of baptism. A person is baptized or undergoes baptism. Even the mention of faith—so indispensable for receiving salvation—occurs only sporadically (e.g., Col. 2:12). Nevertheless, baptism clearly has an "obligation side" too, namely, the recipient's promise as his answer to the claim of his new Lord

upon the recipient's life. This is the only way we can understand the implications of Romans 6, and the only way a text like 1 Peter 3:21 becomes clear to us.¹⁵ These features of baptism, however, proceed to us only from God's decision about and his "claim" upon human life. To talk about this as though we were talking about an independent component of baptism would lead to hopeless abstractions, which would bring us into fundamental conflict with the nature of God's saving acts.

In this connection, it is interesting to observe the difference between the original liturgical Form for Baptism used in the Palatinate (and by Peter Dathenus) and the liturgical Form for Baptism adopted for use in the Dutch churches. The former one contains this formulation: "But just as in all covenants both parties bind themselves together, so we also promise God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that we through his grace do hold and acknowledge him alone as our only, true, and living God."

This has been altered to read: "Whereas in all covenants there are contained two parts, therefore are we by God, through baptism, admonished of and obliged unto new obedience. . . ." This later version places less emphasis on the human "contribution" and accents more strongly the unity of God's promise and demand. It is very important to pay attention to the unity of promise and demand. This unity lies in God's calling. God calls us to live with him and for him. That is a simultaneous promise-and-demand. The promise includes the pledge (*toezegging*) of the Holy Spirit, who works faith. In the washing-away of the sacrament of baptism, cleansing through the Spirit of Christ is intended just as much as cleansing through the blood of Christ.¹⁶

3. Baptism as such is a public act whereby a person is incorporated into the church of Christ. In the Pentecost narrative we encounter the first acts of the disciples in executing the instructions of their Lord. To the Jews the gospel of Christ is preached, with a sharp, accusatory thrust in their direction. That

¹⁵I wrote more extensively about 1 Peter 3:21 in *De gemeente en haar liturgie*, 184-185.

¹⁶Regarding the unity of promise and demand, cf. J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant* (Launceston, Australia: Publication Organization of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, 1985), 56-63. We plan to return to this point below, in our concluding section.

appears especially from the summarizing sentence in Acts 2:36. At the same time, it appears that these Jews could not suffice with a turning about in their thoughts, a conversion of their heart. They also had to break with the trusted circle of their leaders (v. 40) and be baptized (v. 38). Thereby this baptism would function as a public testimony of turning away from their own past and of turning toward the lordship of their new Master (cf. v. 36). When they were baptized, they formed no Pentecost sect, no club for those with religious regrets, but instead they were incorporated into the church of Christ (v. 41), in clear opposition to the church of the hardened Jews. Baptism marked in this way the change of course in their life's path, not only before the face of God, but also in the presence of men.

4. We are unable to include in our discussion a number of issues relating to baptism in the New Testament.¹⁷ Nevertheless, as we conclude this section, we wish to deal briefly with one more matter.

We have been writing about our firm conviction that Matthew 28:19 provides us with the institution of Christian baptism. In our day Scripture-critical considerations have robbed many people of certainty regarding the institution of baptism. In many cases, this uncertainty is bolstered or braced by deriving Christian baptismal customs from the baptism performed by John or from Jesus' baptism by John.

This is not the place to deal extensively with the function of this baptism. We make only one comment.

The baptism performed by John has its own specific and restricted place in the coming of the kingdom of God and in the history of salvation. Respect for John's own words (Matt. 3:11 and parallels; cf. Acts 1:5) leads us to the baptism of Acts 2:38-41. You would rob yourself of any possibility of understanding the specific place of John's baptism and of grasping the point of Acts 19:1-7 if you were to understand John's baptism as the origin of Christian baptism.

¹⁷We refer the interested reader to J. P. Versteeg, "De doop volgens het Nieuwe Testament," *Rondom de doopvont*, 9ff.

At the same time we should observe that the bias for this view is often explicable on the basis of fashionable notions about human solidarity. Supposedly Jesus' baptism in the Jordan symbolizes his impulse toward solidarity and by that feature his baptism provides us an example to follow. Whereas people used to speak of setting apart and of antithesis on the basis of baptism (see the Reformed Confessions), nowadays people would rather speak of baptism as evidence of solidarity.¹⁸ However, it seems all of this has hardly anything to do with a careful exegesis of Scripture.

Intermezzo: from the Words of Scripture to the Doctrine of the Church

The reader will notice that the texts we have discussed provide no solution to diverse questions that strike us as rather crucial to the doctrine of baptism. Here we stumble upon a phenomenon that surfaces in other areas of doctrine. We have in mind the fact that our reflection occurs within a framework of categories that cannot as such be found in the Bible or read into the Bible.

As soon as the Bible addresses us about the matter of baptism, we tend to wrap this issue in our concepts, threatening to wrest it from the living context of the Scripture's speaking, in order then to assign it a place within the system of our thinking. For example, the concept of "*sacrament*" is lying there, ready to use, and we assign to that leading category the whole matter of baptism. Then we proceed to apply our description of "*sacrament*" to baptism. Next, we put a number of questions to this sacrament—for example, what is the relationship between the symbolic value of baptism and the reality reflected in the symbol? With the help of a somewhat literal rendering of scholastic Latin, we usually term this the relationship between the "sign" and "the thing signified" (cf. also Belgic Confession, Art. 35). Under this heading we also raise the question about the

¹⁸Cf. the Lima Declaration regarding baptism, sub 3, and W. G. Overbosch, "Doopsbediening als liturgische didachè," *passim*.

relationship between God's activity by means of the preached Word and his activity by means of the sacrament of baptism. In short, we are facing the reality that between us and the words of the New Testament lie many centuries of confessional-theological reflection and systematization.

Our sense is that we may not react negatively against this phenomenon. Even less may we accept the results of such systematization as being above criticism.

God did not give us the Bible as a collection of sacred formulas that we need simply to recite infallibly. In the words of Holy Scripture God has revealed himself and his plan of salvation, and with the enlightened eyes of our heart (Eph. 1:18) we may study them, reflect upon them, and be thoroughly occupied with them. During the course of history the church can be confronted with questions and issues that as such do not arise in the Bible and to which the Bible accordingly provides no answer in a direct sense. In such a case, the church has the competence and the duty to deal with those concrete questions and issues, and to acquire as much clarity about them as possible. We are thinking, for example, of the question about the validity of baptism administered by heretics, which Augustine faced. When in the context of this controversy the distinction is made between the one who administers the sign and the thing signified by God, then such a distinction is legitimate and useful, precisely with a view to understanding the teaching of Scripture.

In the Middle Ages, when the doctrine of baptism was entirely encapsulated within a philosophically organized sacramental system (which distinguished between a *material* and a *formal* principle), and when the churches of the Reformation broke with this systematization, then this exigency ought to arouse our sympathy. As we evaluate the Reformation's doctrine of the sacraments, we ought to keep this background in mind. We are dealing here with the possibility of confessional-theological reflection upon the plan of salvation God himself has disclosed to us. At the same time what is at stake is the right to develop confessional formulations in which the church

formulates in her own words her conviction regarding the content of Scripture.

But we ought to be testing the terms, concepts, and arguments that have been handed down to us, to evaluate their usefulness. The criterion of usefulness relates to the degree to which the conceptual system is serviceable to preserving God's message intact and handing it down unmutilated.

Many concepts have been forged in the context of defensive need, as tools to withstand heresy and to prevent misunderstanding and abuse. But all of this does not permit us to remove a theological framework from its subordinate position. All our concepts are mere tracing lines in comparison to the imposing painting known as Scripture. As soon as these tracing lines no longer serve to clarify, but begin to occupy center stage, or by their sheer quantity and complexity begin to distract our attention from the painting, then they become unuseful for the church of the Word.

We have formulated this consideration rather generally to serve as an introduction to a new section in our essay. For at this point we intend to open the Reformed Confessions to hear what they say about baptism (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 25-27, and Belgic Confession, Articles 33-34). Because of length, we will not reproduce the content of this confessional material here. But we would like to study these formulations with the help of several questions, in order to test the usefulness of these statements for our own day.

(1) Is it good that the Confession introduces baptism as one of two sacraments, and along that line applies to baptism the definition of sacrament as a (*visible*) *sign* and *seal* of God's promise and *pledge* of God's grace (Heidelberg Catechism, *Answers* 66 and 73; Belgic Confession, Art. 33)?

(2) Is it proper that the Confession introduces sacramental language to explain the Holy Spirit's language in Scripture (Heidelberg Catechism, *Answers* 73 and 78)?

(3) Is the Confession right in calling baptism a "sign of the covenant" (Heidelberg Catechism, *Answer* 74; Belgic Confession,

Art. 34), and on that basis asserting that this sign has come in the place of the Old Testament covenant sign of circumcision?

Perhaps it's best to begin by answering the last question. That question confronts us with the intense sixteenth-century conflict concerning the right and duty of baptizing children. The remaining questions can be answered more easily after we've dealt with this matter.

Moreover, these questions are just as relevant to the Lord's Supper. Therefore, when we move from considering baptism to reflecting on the Lord's Supper, we hope to return to these first two questions in that context.

The Covenant

Characteristic of the Reformed Confessions is that they root the doctrine of baptism in the doctrine of God's covenant with believers and their children. This doctrine of the covenant reaches back quite self-consciously to the Old Testament story about God's covenant with Abraham and his posterity (found in Gen. 17, especially v. 7). Further, because it embodied the conviction that the covenant in the Old and New Testament dispensations is in principle one unified covenant, this doctrine of the covenant supplied the weapons needed to combat the Anabaptist opposition against the right of infant baptism. Just as at the establishment of the covenant with Abraham, God had instituted circumcision as the required sign of the covenant (Gen. 17:11), so too in the new dispensation he replaced this circumcision with the sign of baptism. In this connection irrefutable proof was found in the apostle's portrayal of baptism as the "circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:11-12). In the view of the Reformers, the basis for maintaining infant baptism and for actively opposing the Anabaptist movement since 1525 lay in this unity of God's covenant with Abraham and the New Testament church.

But the opposing voice of the Anabaptist movement appears to have been loud and penetrating. The challenge continues to echo down the corridors of history to our own day, namely, this

penetrating objection against understanding baptism in the context of the doctrine of God's covenant with Abraham. So we are obligated to face this fundamental challenge.

The Covenant with Abraham

Against the dark background of the tower of Babel and God's dispersion of the nations, the Bible portrays for us God's new beginning in Abram, the son of Terah. God called him from Ur and Haran (Gen. 11:31; 12:1) and at that occasion gave him valuable promises:

And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:2-3).

Abram was God's fresh start in history. God focused all his plans and intentions in this one man. After he was taken out of his natural living environment, Abram was destined to become, through his separation, a blessing for all generations of the earth (cf. in addition to Gen. 12:2-3 also 18:18 and 22:18).

For the sake of this worldwide work of history the old man Abram (75 years old, according to Gen. 12:4) had to be given an *offspring*. And that offspring in turn must take possession of a *land*. Regarding both of these immense concerns—offspring and land—God gave Abram unambiguous promises (for the *land*, see Gen. 12:7, 13:15-17, and 15:7ff.; for his numerous *offspring*, see 13:16, 15:5, and 22:17). Abram's life came to be characterized by these promises. His greatest possession was the promise of God. For years on end, he had to wait for everything to come from those promises. The epistle to the Hebrews characterizes Abram, then, as the one who “had the promises” (Heb. 7:6, 11:17).

The story of Genesis 17 occupies a central place in the whole of Abram's history. We can see that already in the name change for both Abram and his wife Sarai (Gen. 17:5, 15). That name change indicated that God was opening a new and decisive phase in Abraham's personal history. What is new is this: twenty-four

years after he called Abram, the Lord formally established his promises of land and offspring, and “incorporated” these promises once and for all in a *covenant*. Earlier already, by means of a ceremonial oath-swearing to Abram (Gen. 15:18), the Lord had confirmed the promise of inheriting the land through offspring. Now, in Genesis 17, the Lord definitively gathered together all his purposes and with great emphasis showed Abraham and Sarah all the riches of his promises (Gen. 17:4ff., 17:15ff.). The covenant included receiving offspring and land as the concretizing of God’s blessing upon Abraham. All of this is accompanied and carried forward with the pledge:

I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God (Gen. 17:7-8).

The promise of offspring brackets, as it were, the promise of land (Gen. 17:8a within 17:7, 8b).

God obligates himself to provide these things. In doing so, God goes as far as possible by placing these personal obligations within a trustworthy and perpetual “institution” (the covenant), to which he will add the confirmation of an oath (Gen. 22:16-18; cf. Heb. 6:13ff.).¹⁹ Thus God binds himself unambiguously to Abraham, to travel with Abraham along a route that, as far as Abraham was concerned, did not exist—the route leading to offspring for a childless ninety-nine year old man. *That* solitary old man is called “the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:4-5). To that kind of man God said, “I will make you

¹⁹In his day Herman Bavinck offered the following attractive definition of a covenant: the Hebrew word *berith* “indicates in general any kind of promise, agreement, treaty, covenant, regulation, determination, etc. that is placed under God’s supervision by a formal ceremony, and thereby obtains the character of indissolubility” (*Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 4th ed.[Kampen 1929], 3:183). Cf. also C. Westermann, “Genesis 17 und die Bedeutung von *berit*,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 101 (1976), col. 161ff.

exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you” (Gen. 17:6). The covenant envisioned, accordingly, absolute impossibilities. Only the creative power of almighty God would be able to bring about the realization of these promises (Gen. 17:1; cf. Rom. 4:17).

We know of Abraham’s fierce wrestling with this business (Gen. 15, 16, 17:17ff.; Rom. 4:18ff.; Heb. 11:8-19), and Sarah’s difficulties are shown us in just as much detail (Gen. 18:12ff.). When God makes everything dependent on his creative intervention, then Abraham is forced to trust completely in that power. Repeatedly Abraham must forget about himself. No other choice is set before him than to await the fulfillment of the promises—which were the meaning of his existence!—absolutely and completely from God’s hand.

When in the events of Genesis 17 the Lord regulates all of these matters in a covenant agreement, he is not merely committing to Abraham binding promises. God is committing *himself* as one who is bound by these promises. What we customarily call a “promise” is really an obligation that God places upon himself. God’s self-obligation becomes the meaning of Abraham’s life from now on, since God’s promise alone holds forth the prospect of the formation of Abraham’s people and the reign of blessing for the world through Abraham and his offspring.

The Covenant with Abraham as Covenant of Circumcision

After speaking in Genesis 17 of God putting himself under obligation, the text tells us of a second essential obligation, this time a duty belonging to Abraham and his descendants: “keeping” the covenant by circumcising every male (Gen. 17:9-14).

Here we face the question why, in the covenant requirements of Genesis 17, God demanded precisely this act as the key to “keeping” the covenant. In fact, “covenant” and “circumcision” are identified several times or used synonymously in Scripture (e.g., Acts 7:8).

In our view, the following seven considerations are significant.

1. Circumcising the male sexual organ naturally involves reproduction and fertility. This was true among the surrounding nations and is no different for Abraham. This was all the more relevant now that this circumcision was fully incorporated into the context of Abraham's fatherhood.

2. Yet we must remember that this circumcision is amazingly remarkable. It serves to deepen the riddle of God's promise of fatherhood given to a man almost one hundred years old. If among many nations circumcision served to enhance marital relations and fertility for young men, with Abraham this cutting in his flesh and its long-term consequence provided a wholly different meaning. The sign he bore in his flesh functions as "*sign of the covenant*" (Gen. 17:11). That is to say: this particular circumcision was a sign pointing continually to God's having put himself under obligation, being thereby a reminder that constantly obliged Abraham to believe in God's promise.²⁰ As often as Abraham looked at himself he had to recall God's promise: your physical son born of Sarah will be your descendant (cf. "of her" in Gen. 17:16). Abraham's entire marriage relationship was placed under the light of God's covenant. As he thought about God's promises, Abraham was directed to his marital relation with Sarah. Looking at himself cast Abraham upon God's promise. This is how circumcision helped Abraham live before the face of God, the *Almighty One*. Only this God's creational power would be adequate to enable the breakthrough to the fulfillment of the promises by means of the fruitfulness of these two old people. That is the force of Genesis 17:1 (cf. also 28:3, 4; 35:11; 48:3; Exod. 6:2-4; and Ps. 115:14-15).

3. This is how we should understand the connection the apostle Paul makes in Romans 4:11 between circumcision and

²⁰Thus we interpret the word "covenant" in the phrase "sign of the covenant" as an objective genitive (cf. M. V. Fox, "The Sign of the Covenant," *Révue biblique*, 81 [1974]: 573).

Abraham's faith: ". . .and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised. . . ." The apostle is alluding here to Genesis 15:6, "Then he believed in the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." This announcement functions in the very same context that we have been discussing: God commits himself and Abraham to an innumerable offspring that would come forth exclusively from Abraham's physical son. In that context Scripture informs us that Abraham continually trusted God. That posture was, in God's eyes, Abraham's "righteousness," which means that this was how Abraham behaved in conformity to the relationship God wanted to enjoy with him. Not Abraham's performance, not his manipulation, but Abraham's trust in God would unlock the future. Apparently, then, righteousness before God consists in looking away from yourself and standing before God with empty hands. Precisely that which Abraham lacked in himself but expected from God, is what characterized his life. The truth of that posture was cemented ("sealed") by the circumcision of Genesis 17. Looking at himself was to lead Abraham to look away from himself. With that awareness he must now regard his wife and give himself to marital fellowship with Sarah (cf. Rom. 4:18-22). Waiting for a son began with waiting upon God. So in this case, circumcision was not serving human reproductive capacity, but was intended precisely to strengthen that faith whereby one who was faced with the comprehensive powerlessness of his own life would entrust himself to the comprehensive power of God.

4. In Genesis 17 circumcision belonged to that "demand side" assigned to Abraham within the covenant that God proclaimed over him and established with him. By undergoing circumcision Abraham would be showing his abiding faith, spoken of in Genesis 15:6, and in that way demonstrating his covenant faithfulness. At the same time this circumcision was a gift given to Abraham. Romans 4:11 says that he "received" (ἐλάβεν) circumcision. After all, the "sign of the covenant" is a "reminder" that not only keeps alive Abraham's awareness of duty, but also calls to mind God's self-adopted obligation to

make Abraham the father of many nations.²¹ This is no different than with those other signs of remembrance which were also called “signs of the covenant,” namely, the rainbow (Gen. 9:12) and the sabbath (Exod. 31:12-17). These signs served to keep a person close to God, but at the same time God was also continually being reminded of his promise.²²

This also is how circumcision served within Abraham’s situation, helping him in the face of various logical, human considerations to surrender himself to God’s promise and reminding God to fulfill that promise.

5. Now we can see why this circumcision could never serve to undergird Jewish boasting in their physical descent, or Jewish pride over against uncircumcised pagans, or Jewish reliance upon their own law works.

For circumcision specifically summons a person away from himself, to God. Human salvation rests wholly in God’s speaking and acting. For that reason, circumcision could never be a legitimate counter-argument against preaching faith in the crucified Christ as the only full-fledged way of salvation for all Gentiles. In Romans 4 the apostle Paul used nothing less than circumcision as a weapon against Jewish opposition to the gospel, when he argued from Genesis 15 and 17—the premise of his argument being that Abraham’s tent was Israel’s delivery room. Rather than being a counter-argument, circumcision is the very proof of the truth of faith-righteousness being preached. Instead of being a national symbol serving to erect a definitive wall of *separation* between Israel and the Gentiles, this circumcision was at bottom a pointer to Israel’s *serviceability* to the other nations. This circumcision identified not Israel’s privilege, but Israel’s serviceability to the blessing that would come to all nations.²³ In

²¹Cf. M. V. Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant,” 595.

²²The same could be said about the many cultic “reminders” (e.g., cf. Exod. 28:12 and 29:7).

²³Here we are opposing the suggestions of W. G. Overbosch, “Doopsbediening als liturgische didachè,” 2:4-30; K. Blei, *De kinderdoop in discussie*, 82ff., 86; and H. B. Kossen, “Verbond en besnijdenis bij Paulus in verband met de doop,” *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift*, 19 (1964-1965): 436.

Genesis 17 the “many nations” are at the center of the picture. If you look carefully at circumcision, you will see nothing less than *that* divine pledge.

6. Circumcision as such is a painful operation that leaves one sore and wounded. This feature directs our attention to another characteristic of the sign language of circumcision. Abraham cannot render the service for which God has chosen him without further ado. First the knife must fall and human “flesh” must be cut away. That is how this man and his male offspring were to become serviceable before God.²⁴

This sign language is used emphatically already in the Old Testament (cf. Exod. 6:11, 29; Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; Isa. 6:10; Ezek. 44:7, 9; and Jer. 9:26).

This feature of circumcision forms the basis for the apostle Paul’s argument for a required break within human lives, namely, breaking with the old mode of existence and devoting our lives to God. The apostle can discuss this issue only in connection with the saving work of Christ who at the cross separated these two modes of existence once and for all. We have in mind here especially Colossians 2:11-12, where the apostle calls believers to lay aside the “body of the flesh” (referring to the mode of existence characterized by “carnality”) in Christ—that is, in his dying, being buried, and rising. That, for the apostle, is the fulfilling of circumcision, far surpassing the circumcision done by human hands. In fact, in Colossians 2 his discussion of circumcision helps the apostle focus his general instructions regarding the scope of Christ’s death and resurrection in Romans

These suggestions repeatedly appeal to Romans 3:1. But this text speaks not about the meaning of circumcision, but about the privilege and benefit of circumcision as characteristic of being a Jew. With this argument the apostle is opposing various kinds of misplaced boasting in circumcision. Israel has indeed received a salvation-historical privilege. But this privilege exists *in service to* salvation history, which is to say, in service to the nations. “To the Jew first, and then to the Gentile” is the historical law governing God’s salvation. That is also the law of God’s wrath (Rom. 2:9-10). For all of these reasons, it is impossible to view “covenant” as a Jewish prerogative (cf. K. Blei, 80-81).

²⁴Recall how Scripture speaks about “making well” or “healing” in connection with circumcision (John 7:23).

6-8 (cf. Rom. 6:6, 12; 7:24; 8:11; cf. also the apostle's language in Rom. 2:25ff. and Phil. 3:3ff.). Whenever the apostle writes about circumcision, he leads us to the preaching of faith in the crucified and risen Christ (cf. Gal. 5:2ff.; Phil. 3:9). Like nobody else, Paul had known the Jewish opposition to the gospel of the crucified Christ, and like nobody else he was exposed in his colossal mistake of assuming that circumcision was intended to be a symbol of proud Jewish nationalism. And he encountered his own former opposition among his "brothers according to the flesh" throughout the rest of his life. At those moments, the core of his message came to him again and again from circumcision—namely, looking away from one's own ability, trusting in God's life-generating Word (Rom. 4:17), in Christ and through the Spirit breaking with a manmade world-and-life system (Col. 2:6ff.; Rom. 2:25; and Phil. 3:7ff.), Jew and Gentile becoming one in Christ (Eph. 2:11ff.).

7. At God's command all of Abraham's household had to be circumcised (Gen. 17:11ff.). Isaac would be the *offspring* in whom Abraham's life would have meaning and through whom God's messianic work in the world would progress (Gen. 17:19-21; 21:12). Nevertheless, Ishmael and every male among Abraham's slaves had to be circumcised, even before Isaac's birth (Gen. 17:23ff.). Moreover, this was a matter of life and death (Gen. 17:14). In this way Abraham's entire household was branded with God's covenant with Abraham. From this time on, Abraham's house was characterized by the holiness of the God of the covenant. For God's holiness glows with a radiating effect (cf. also Exod. 12:44ff.), a glow that accompanies our God along his unimaginable paths toward the future. In Abraham God had made a new beginning. He wanted to open up, through Abraham and his offspring, an unimaginable way of salvation for the world, namely, the way to Messiah Jesus and through him to the nations. Everyone who bore in his flesh the sign of circumcision was taken up in this expectation. Just as Abraham's servants were brought along from place to place and their lives were determined by Abraham's calling, so would it be in the future. Israel was to travel a holy highway, mapped out by God's calling.

Everyone who traveled along with Israel traveled on this particular road and would therefore also be marked out by circumcision.

Indeed, this circumcision provided Israel a separate and isolated identity among the nations. Nevertheless, this was God's holy highway to the nations. This is precisely how he wanted, through Abraham and his offspring, to seek the nations. And after this pathway had been narrowing for centuries, the precise moment when this blessing for the nations was ready for distribution beyond the borders of Israel is clearly identified in Scripture. It is the moment when the Seed of Abraham said, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19).

This word of worldwide historical import was spoken by Christ in the power of his resurrection. As never before, he is filling in as the substitute who performs the legal obligations of the covenant. Therefore he is also called the "surety" of the covenant (Heb. 7:22). Stated more strongly: in his own person he is that covenant. As such he is the light unto the nations, so that God's salvation may reach the ends of the earth (Isa. 42:6; 49:6-8).

The Covenant with Abraham and the New Testament

The question now faces us regarding whether and to what degree the covenant which God announced to Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 17 is in force at this time. For the church today lives in the New Testament dispensation, the dispensation of fulfillment in and through Jesus Christ. May we then continue drawing conclusions for the New Testament church directly from Genesis 17, particularly with regard to the matter of the position and treatment of the children of believers?

Frequently this question receives a negative answer. Such an answer emphasizes the fulfillment of the promises in Christ, whereby God's Old Testament covenant with Abraham has served its purpose. In defense of this argument, people usually point to the fact that the idea of "covenant" fades into the background in the New Testament; the central position that "covenant" enjoyed in the Old Testament is replaced by other central concepts like "kingdom of God," "conversion," and

“faith.”²⁵ Today, the key is thought to be no longer God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants, but faith and conversion. This means, among other things, that God no longer seeks a collectivity known as a people or nation, something that comes into existence through marriage and family; rather, he is seeking the fellowship of those who by virtue of a personal decision of faith have been incorporated into the body of Christ.

If the people of God had formerly been constituted through *birth*, now they are constituted only through *faith*.²⁶

Here we have reached an important intersection of ideas. Denying that our children may be called “children of the covenant” and rejecting Genesis 17:7 as a basis for infant baptism are conclusions drawn directly from this line of thinking.

We wish to make five comments regarding this cluster of considerations.

1. The notion that the doctrine of the covenant actually comes to us more from the Old than from the New Testament is a misunderstanding that must be decisively repudiated.

²⁵The line of argument used by K. Blei (*De kinderdoop in diskussie*, 66-82) is characteristic of this position. His view is that the “new covenant” was made with Israel and at the same time broadened beyond Israel. But the result of this view is that the church may then be characterized as “covenant people” only in a derivative sense. This argument depends on a selective use of Scripture, one we think is quite invalid. Left out of consideration, for example, are (1) what the Old Testament says about the “rest”; (2) Christ’s words at the institution of the Lord’s Supper, as he gave the cup; and (3) the apostle’s argument in Romans 9:6ff. and in Galatians 3 and 4 against the old covenant people.

²⁶On Matthew 3:9 K. Blei writes, “Here physical descent and blood relationship are relativized and thwarted in a way that had not yet happened in Israel. Apparently the church of Jesus Christ is no longer what Israel once was (and still is), namely, a nation of blood relationships. What Israel also was once, that’s what the church is through and through, namely, a fellowship of faith. For that reason, children do not belong to the church just like they did and do belong to Israel. Viewing children of believing church members as ‘children of the covenant’ seems to me an invalid application of an Old Testament and Jewish line of thinking to the New Testament church” (*De kinderdoop in diskussie*, 101).

In the first place, a simple word count cannot help us here, since the real issue is the weight of the words in their contexts. When the epistle to the Hebrews describes the work of Christ and its eternal fruit with the aid of prophecies about the new covenant (Heb. 7-10), then that central Scriptural testimony already constitutes a counter argument against the premise that the covenant idea fades away in the New Testament. The same can be said regarding the fact that on the evening of his betrayal, Christ presented his blood as the blood of the covenant when he placed the cup of the Lord's Supper in the hands of the church for all future ages as a remembrance (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25).

Similar comments could be made in light of 2 Corinthians 3, where the apostle presents the central New Testament preaching of righteousness as the ministry of the Spirit in glory, which was simultaneously the ministry of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6). And that new covenant is certainly not a Jewish prerogative; the words with which Christ instituted the Lord's Supper speak of his blood of the covenant being poured out for "many."²⁷

In the second place, the essence of the covenant can be present in a passage without the word "covenant" being used. For example, when in Ephesians 2 the apostle declares, with reference to Gentiles who have come to faith, that formerly they were far off but now had been brought near (v. 13), he is speaking implicitly about the covenant. For in the previous verse Paul has characterized this "being far off" as being excluded from citizenship in Israel and being a stranger to the covenants of promise, without hope, and without God in the world. So if those former Gentiles are now fellow citizens along with the saints and members of God's household of faith (v. 19), then this text is indeed speaking about the reality of the covenant (cf. also Eph. 3:6).

²⁷The new covenant is not a Jewish prerogative that has been expanded to include the Gentiles, as K. Blei argues (*De kinderdoop in diskussie*, 81), but it is essentially the covenant for "the many" (Mark 14:24; Matt. 26:28), one that very emphatically involves "not only the Jews" (cf. Rom. 9:24ff., 10:4ff., and 11:5ff.).

The same could be said about Paul's song of praise regarding the New Testament church being "the temple of the living God," which he sought to prove by stringing together various Old Testament words belonging to the sphere of God's covenant with his people Israel (2 Cor. 6:16-18). Yet we nowhere encounter the *word* "covenant" in these verses. This is analogous to an engaged couple who use the *word* "marriage" far more frequently before the wedding than after. But to conclude on the basis of word count that their marriage appears to have faded from their minds and must have given way to other more preferable realities, is to show lack of understanding and discernment rather than clear thinking. If the reality of something's presence depended on frequency of word usage, how then must we interpret the fact that often in those days and weeks just before a divorce the word "marriage" is used most frequently? It would be interesting to review the language of the prophets from this perspective. Then we would certainly discover that the prophets had to talk a lot about "divorce" but also about a wedding feast after the breakup. That latter is what we call the new and eternal covenant.

2. The supposition that the important concept of "the kingdom of God" has replaced the word "covenant" is just as impossible to maintain. "Covenant" and "kingdom of God" are two expressions that shed light on the same reality of God's saving work from differing angles. This appears, for example, from the fact that heaven's glory is described as "eating and drinking in the kingdom of God," and at the same time as "reclining with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:28). Obviously it is the covenant children of Israel who have been invited into the kingdom (Matt. 8:12; cf. also 22:1ff.).

To this day we drink the cup of the new covenant in the expectation of the kingdom (Mark 14:24-25; cf. also the table discussion in Luke 22:29-30).

"Covenant" leads us to think of Abraham. "Kingdom" leads us to think of David. Christ came to complete God's work begun and developed in Abraham and David, and he presented himself

to Israel as the son of David and of Abraham (Matt. 1:1; 28:18-20). It would be well worth our while to investigate just how often Abraham and David are held before the Jews in the book of *Acts*—the book about the kingdom (cf. Acts 1:3; 28:31).

This is why the Reformed liturgical Form for the Baptism of Infants is correct in describing children as “heirs of the kingdom of God and of his covenant.” For the content of the covenant with Abraham contains the promise about the “kings,” and God led his servant to the glory of Davidic kingship along the route of a covenant (cf. Ps. 89), one in which God established guidelines for its implementation in terms of his pledges to Abraham in Genesis 17.

The “Almighty” of Genesis 17 (covenant) is the “Lord of hosts” of the books of Samuel (kingdom). This “Lord of hosts” lays the foundation of his kingdom by generating offspring from a barren woman (1 Sam. 1).

3. In all of Christ’s saving work, especially in his resurrection on Easter, God presented himself as the God of Abraham. God tied his name to this man for all time (cf. Heb. 11:16, in connection with vv. 8ff. and 17ff.). It is precisely in his raising Christ from the dead that we see the God of Abraham drawing near to us, as we learn from Acts 3:13, 25, 26; 13:26, 32ff.; and Romans 4:17ff., 23ff. And the raising of the dead at the end of history will also proclaim the honor of God, who has named himself in terms of Abraham, as we see in Matthew 22:32; Mark 12:26; and Luke 20:37-38.

All of this shows us that in the coming of Christ, God’s revelation to and through Abraham obtained its most powerful realization. In the New Testament’s opening scene, both Mary and Zechariah have gone on ahead, leading the church in commemorating that fact in song (Luke 1:54-55 and 72-74).

4. If we view Christ’s work in the light of God’s promises to Abraham, then we soon see that those promises are not rendered out of date and obsolete by Christ, something we might view as a phase we passed through long ago. The contrary is true. Christ has bestowed upon these promises a definitive legal power (Rom. 15:8; 2 Cor. 1:20) and thereby laid the foundation for their

definitive “implementation.” As soon as he was exalted at God’s right hand and had thereby become the universal and immortal heir of David’s dominion (according to Psalm 110), he began the real implementation of those promises. For the promised inheritance of the *land* had never been given to Abraham’s people in the days of Joshua. That inheritance was much larger than the land of Canaan. Abraham was heir to the world (Rom. 4:13) and the hand that would gather this people would have to be far stronger than that of Joshua (Heb. 4:1-13; 11:9-16). Still today that promise is still being realized and implemented. The promised “*multitude of nations*” of whom Abraham was made father began to be constituted only after Pentecost. That agenda is still being implemented. The *blessing* in Abraham and his descendants had to await Christ’s coronation before it could be extended to the world. It is Christ who brings to realization the promises given to Abraham, and as a surety he guarantees the definitive validity of the pledges to which God once bound himself. Christ’s work does not shove the Abrahamic covenant into some back corner of history’s closet. Nor does Christ’s work reduce the covenant to something that concerns merely a remainder (the “remnant” of Israel).²⁸ Christ’s work unfurls the Abrahamic covenant on an international stage. *Apart from the covenant with Abraham you cannot properly understand the work of Christ from his ascension onward.* Jesus Christ is the one who brings to Abraham his great posterity, and so it was with an eye to Christ that God made his promises to Abraham (Gal. 3:6-9).

5. All of this sheds light on the fact that it was precisely in the *gift of Pentecost* that God, in such a magnificent way, took hold of implementing his self-adopted obligation toward Abraham. The God of Genesis 12 removed the barriers of Genesis 11, now that his great deeds in Christ are being proclaimed at an international

²⁸According to H. B. Kossen, the transition from “old” to “new” covenant involves an “intra-Jewish problematic,” described by Paul in 2 Corinthians 3. He supposes that the nations enter the picture for the first time in 2 Corinthians 3:18 (“Verbond en besnijdenis bij Paulus in verband met de doop,” 443).

level. Through the Spirit he comes to live with his people, and that is for now—until the glorious return of Christ—the most glorious fulfillment of his promise to be a God to Abraham and his descendants.

This gift of the Spirit is, according to the Old Testament prophecies, the characteristic and definitive gift of the new covenant. It is preeminently through this gift that this new covenant can be stronger than the old covenant of Sinai. Christ has obtained this Spirit and has received charge over this Spirit (Acts 2:33). This Spirit proceeds from the hands of Christ to the disciples of Christ, in order henceforth to dwell in the one church of Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11-22). In connection with this, strange things happen: natural branches are cut off and wild shoots are engrafted into the “tree” of God’s covenant community. But the tree itself stays standing, and Abraham remains the root of that tree (Rom. 11:16ff.). This tree is sustained down through the centuries not by the natural branches, but by this single root.²⁹

So it appears that God’s covenant with Abraham is not subject to the contrastive phrases “old covenant” and “new covenant.” *The new covenant is God’s covenant with Abraham in the definitive state of being implemented.* Since the lawgiving at Sinai, the covenant initiated there with Israel (*that is the “old covenant”*) was a shadow-filled preparation for this new covenant. But the covenant with Abraham preceded Moses! On the foundation of this reality the apostle Paul more than once (Rom. 4:9ff.; Gal. 3:15ff.) constructed his most penetrating arguments against the Judaizers.³⁰ Abraham and his circumcision can never be used as the crowning witness for a Jewish identity, for Jewish nationalistic ideals, or for Jewish religious pride.

This means for us as well that the matter of circumcision cannot simply be seen as a shadow-filled ceremony in the same way we view the many Mosaic legislative regulations for worship.

²⁹*Contra* H. B. Kossen, “Verbond en besnijdenis bij Paulus in verband met de doop,” 437-438.

³⁰Stephen’s speech shows a similar structure: “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham” (Acts 7:2). Cf. also the wording of John 7:22.

These considerations are, in our estimation, of decisive significance for understanding the meaning of Peter's words in Acts 2:38-39—a central proof-text throughout the centuries for the legitimacy of infant baptism. Before looking more carefully at that text, we wish to state, in view of this section, the conclusion that the New Testament does not forbid but instead firmly requires us to learn to understand the reality of the New Testament church on the basis of God's covenant with Abraham. The covenant with Abraham has not lost its validity. On the contrary, especially in this dispensation it is being effectuated through the power of the exalted Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Christ had his disciples demonstrate this continuity of the dispensations in a remarkable way when he commanded them not to leave Jerusalem after his ascension, but to stay especially in that place to await the promised Spirit (Luke 24:47, 49, 52; Acts 1:4). Our respect for this continuity obligates us to investigate the questions that we are now considering.

Baptism as Sign of the New Covenant

After the preceding discussion, it will require little argument to defend our claim that Scripture gives us the right to qualify baptism as *sign of the new covenant*. In light of its institution by the risen Christ, Christian baptism is intended to establish the fact that Christ had just completed his work of suffering and was raised unto the glory of new life by his Father.

Those facts are not registered as biographical data drawn from the life of Jesus. They are presented by baptism as facts of salvation for the nations. All who are called by the gospel of the apostles and are made disciples of Christ share in this Christ and are incorporated into him. The great facts of salvation history (Golgotha, Easter, and Pentecost) become the most powerful data of their own personal history. For baptism establishes the new regime of their lives. It is the public entrance of Christ's church in this world. For that reason, the nations must believe *and* be baptized (Mark 16:16).

Accordingly, this baptism is a sign that portrays and establishes the central events of God's saving acts. In this way the act of baptism communicates the fact that in Christ and the Holy Spirit, God has exerted great effort to complete his saving work on earth, using the overwhelmingly superior means belonging to the new covenant.

Acts 2:38-39

It is not surprising that on Pentecost the apostle Peter ended his sermon about the Christ who had poured out the Spirit with an appeal to repentance and baptism.

Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

"In the name of Jesus"—that distinguishes Peter's summons to repentance and baptism from that of John the Baptizer, for this Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit. John pointed to that as a future gift, but now Peter may proclaim it as a present reality.

When in verse 39 Peter adds to these words the reason, "For the promise is for you . . .," the word "promise" envisions not the pledge of land and offspring found in Genesis 17. Nor does the word have the colorless meaning of a concept called "promise." Within the analysis of doctrinal theology, the concept of "promise" may be a useful notion, but it represents a lifeless abstraction if it is simply read into the biblical narrative of Acts 2. With his phrase "the promise," Peter meant *the Holy Spirit*.

From the ancient days of the prophets, the Spirit was promised as *the* promise of the new covenant. This promise was not only given to the people of Israel over the long term envisioned by prophecy (e.g., by Joel, Acts 2:17ff.), but it was repeated in the ears of the disciples by the chief Prophet shortly before the day of the great gift. What had once been a period of centuries had by this time become "not many days from now" (Acts 1:4-5; cf. also Luke 24:49; Acts 2:33). And that which God

promised one day to bestow he now bestows by these messianic hands of Christ.

That this promised Spirit was intended not only for the small circle of the disciples but for the Jewish people, serves as an argument to support the pledge of verse 38 and in that way to fortify as well the appeal to repent.

The apostle did not forget the Jews scattered in the Diaspora, who at that moment were beyond the reach of his voice. “*All who are afar off*” may consider themselves as being addressed with God’s promise, even though as God of the covenant (“our God”) the Lord must still bridge the distance for them by means of the *calling*.

Here Peter is implicitly disclosing a perspective on the calling of the Gentiles, a perspective he would come to understand only later (cf. Acts 10:47; 11:16-17; 15:7-11). That he came later to understand this perspective does nothing to vitiate its presence here (cf. 1 Pet. 1:10ff.).

One more feature of this foundational story of Acts 2 enthralls us. At this weighty moment Peter does not ignore the *children*. The promised Spirit is for them, too. How could the apostle have known that the Holy Spirit was intended for the *whole* Jewish fellowship? How did Peter ever think, at this particular moment, to mention the *children*? How did he know that God intended his Spirit for them too?

In our opinion, only one satisfactory answer is possible: Peter knew this on account of the content and structure of God’s covenant fellowship with his people ever since the days of Abraham. That is what made him speak as he did, and from that covenant fellowship his words derived their import (just as later in Acts 3:25).

Baptism and Circumcision

Now we are in a position to consider the relationship between the sign of the covenant with Abraham (circumcision) and the sign of the new covenant (baptism). May we assert that baptism has come in the place of circumcision, as the Reformed confessional and liturgical documents do?

- Heidelberg Catechism, *Answer* 74, states that in the new covenant, baptism has been instituted in place of circumcision.
- Belgic Confession, Article 34, says that by the shedding of his blood, Jesus Christ has put an end to all other sheddings of blood. In that connection, the Belgic Confession notes that circumcision, “which was done with blood,” has been abolished by Jesus Christ. In place thereof he instituted the sacrament of baptism.
- The liturgical Form for the Baptism of Infants formulates it this way: “Since, then, baptism has come in the place of circumcision”

Everybody would agree that the issues involved here are less clear than those involving the relationship between Passover and the Lord’s Supper. Nowhere do we read that at the occasion of a particular circumcision, Christ ordained that from henceforth the disciple were to employ baptism as a sign of the covenant.

Nor are we justified in simply lumping circumcision together with the many ritual acts that have lost their purpose with the coming of Christ. Recall that we just finished analyzing the continuity between the Abrahamic covenant and the new covenant.

We know that the apostle Paul waged an intense struggle against those who would accept converted Gentiles as full-fledged members of the church only if they became circumcised like the Jews. At that moment circumcision became, for Paul, the symbol of Jewish works righteousness, and as such, a blaspheming of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross (see Galatians, especially 2:4; 3:10ff.; 5:2-6; and Phil. 3:2ff.).

Nevertheless, the apostle realized at the same time that this handling of circumcision represented a departure from its original purpose and came to serve Judaizing pride. In terms of its origin, circumcision had nothing to do with such pride, for it was the seal of the righteousness of faith (Rom. 4:11).

Nor can we ignore the incident when, years after the institution of baptism, the apostle employed circumcision in special circumstances (Acts 16:3; 21:21-24).

This state of affairs obligates us, then, to analyze the following features. Baptism proceeds from the very center of salvation history, which is to say: it comes to us from the hands of the risen Christ. This feature alone grants to the sign of baptism a value superior to that of circumcision, especially on account of the name that is pronounced or called upon in connection with baptism. The name of Abraham is tied to the rite of circumcision; baptism brings us to the great son of Abraham, in whom the substance and struggle of Abraham's life have found their meaning. Whereas circumcision stood as a sign of God's centripetal work, baptism marks the expansion of that work in the direction of the nations.

As a portrayal of the washing away of sins and of the gift of the Spirit, baptism renders circumcision superfluous in the same way a close-up photograph surpasses and replaces a satellite image. Baptism concretizes circumcision.

Further, we may say that baptism implies circumcision. One who has been circumcised must indeed be baptized (Acts 2:38), but one who is baptized no longer needs to be circumcised. This conclusion is what the apostle stated very clearly in Colossians 2:11-12. That passage contains no sharp polemic against circumcision. Paul is simply observing that circumcision is present implicitly in the fellowship that exists with Christ, a fellowship that came into existence definitively in baptism. That is why baptism is called "the circumcision of Christ," which we could also translate, "the Christian circumcision."³¹

We would be stating the matter too strongly, I think, if we were to describe the message of Colossians 2:11-12 as an explicit replacement of circumcision by baptism. Rather, this passage describes the richness of baptism to *include* the meaning of

³¹*Contra* K. Blei (*De kinderdoop in discussie*, 83), who is inclined to identify the "circumcision of Christ" with Christ's death on the cross. However, this interpretation contradicts the context and flow of argument in the passage.

circumcision, and thereby baptism renders circumcision superfluous as a distinct ceremony.

We encounter this same movement elsewhere throughout the New Testament. Proceeding on the basis of God's covenant with Abraham and circumcision as the sign of that covenant, we travel various routes to arrive at Christian baptism.

- Circumcision points to the miracle of the church's birth, and brings us to the New Testament miracle of giving life to the church amid the death of paganism. We read about this in Galatians 3:27, 29: the baptized Gentile is the descendant of Abraham and enjoys the status of the miracle child Isaac (Gal. 4:28).
- Circumcision is a sign of the promise that Abraham would become father of many nations, and brings us to the New Testament apostolic message regarding one body, one baptism in the church of the one Lord (Eph. 2:11ff.; 3:6; 4:4ff.; cf. also Acts 10:47; 11:17).
- Circumcision seals the righteousness of faith (Rom. 4:11; cf. also Phil. 3:3), and brings us to the place where this righteousness is earned for us (Rom. 3:21ff.), to which baptism continually calls us back (Rom. 6:3ff.).
- Circumcision is a sign of the covenant wherein God will be the God of Abraham and his descendants, and brings us ultimately to the gift of the Spirit in whom God has given himself completely to his people. Baptism anchors this moment and keeps it alive in our memory (cf. John 14:23; Acts 2:38; 2 Cor. 6:16-18, and other places).
- Therefore, it is little wonder that in reflecting on God's intervention in his own life and the lives of those called to be saints, the apostle ends up at the event described in Matthew 28:19. For "putting off the body of flesh," vividly portrayed in circumcision, is realized in the cross and resurrection of Christ. From his very hands the New Testament church has now received baptism.

So we see that the apostle's message in Colossians 2:11-12 does not function in isolation from the rest of Scripture. An

appeal to that message is certainly a meaningful appeal in establishing the relationship between circumcision and baptism. In the dispensation of the Spirit this baptism as an institution of Christ has taken the place of circumcision, not by virtue of a formal command for that replacement, but on account of the uniquely inherent value of baptism. In the progress of salvation history, circumcision has been surpassed and improved by baptism.³² The nature of salvation history ensured that among Jewish Christians circumcision faded into disuse, and was not taken over among Gentile Christians.

We would never be able to speak of this replacement apart from the facts of Golgotha, Easter, and Pentecost. For there circumcision found its fulfillment and baptism its beginning. For that reason, the language of the Reformed confessional and liturgical documents has come to function for us as shorthand. In our debates with the Anabaptists, this shorthand has usually required expanded explanation with the help of exegesis.³³

Circumcision and Infant Baptism

One last question must be dealt with in this connection. That involves the argument defending infant baptism as arising out of circumcision, which God had commanded to be administered eight days after birth (Gen. 17:12). Is this argument compelling?

One can shorten the line of reasoning, in our opinion. After observing that in this dispensation baptism has come in the place of circumcision, one could then point to the circumcision of newborn children as the ultimate proof for the right and duty of baptizing infants.

God's covenant with Abraham, including the sign of the covenant, is not ceremonial in a way similar to those Old

³²This superiority and improvement are seen also in the fact that with baptism the distinction between Jew and Gentile, and between male and female, falls away and the unity of all believers in Christ comes to occupy center stage (Gal. 3:28).

³³Cf. J. P. Versteeg "De doop volgens het Nieuwe Testament," 28-32, and H. N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology*, trans. by John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 396-414.

Testament customs whose ongoing use in the Christian church should be discontinued (see Belgic Confession, Art. 25). Nevertheless, that does not yet allow us simply to transfer and apply to the New Testament church each element belonging to the covenant institution described in Genesis 17. Here we should engage in substantive analysis and consider this question on the basis of the unique nature of circumcision and baptism.

Even the claim, repeated down through the centuries, that the new covenant cannot be inferior to the Abrahamic covenant, and thus that in the new covenant the children have a right to the sign of the covenant, is not very persuasive as an isolated argument. For one could easily use this same argument to “prove” the validity of paedocommunion on the basis of customs associated with Passover.

The question before us can be decided only if we begin by determining the unique function of the circumcision of children. Why did God involve, from the very start, Abraham’s yet-to-be-born descendants in the institution of the covenant and in circumcision? Why did every baby boy have to carry in his flesh the mark of the covenant after one week? Here we face the decisive questions debated for centuries between the Reformed and Anabaptists.

As we have already seen, circumcision pointed primarily to the miracle birth of Abraham’s son Isaac. Abraham could not have begotten him, and Sarah had been unable to conceive him. Nevertheless, God directed every event and every pledge toward this end—this dead end of the worn out life of the father and mother of the church. God can raise up children for Abraham from stones (Matt. 3:9; Luke 3:8), but God didn’t do that. Through a process that took years, God first brought Abraham and Sarah to the point of acknowledging their absolute impotence, in order then, amid all that hopelessness, to employ their marriage as never before. God permitted every human capacity to wear out, he took away every element of genealogical pride, so that he could then employ his creation (marriage) for paving his way of salvation down through the centuries. This is how God demonstrated for every generation, in a way so

abundantly clear, that the descendants of Abraham did not enter God's covenant on account of their birth from Abraham. Those descendants could be born only by virtue of the power of God's covenant word. Obviously, God's covenant regulated their births! Had the covenant depended upon creaturely ability to beget and bring to birth, then there would never have been one Israelite in the world. But as Stephen proclaimed in Jerusalem, "And he [God] gave him [Abraham] the covenant of circumcision; and *thus* [οὕτως] Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day. . ." (Acts 7:8).³⁴ That was the fundamental instruction for the church, and has remained so down through every age—namely, that God's determination preceded the birth of Isaac! And when by the power of his calling, God began to raise up a people from among the Gentiles, the pride of the Judaizers was exposed by the apostle to the Gentiles as a grotesque misunderstanding and insolent defiance of the God of Genesis 17. In responding to that situation, the apostle fashioned his argument out of the course of events played out in the tent of the patriarch (cf. Rom. 9:8ff.; Gal. 4:28ff.).

Why, then, did every baby boy have to carry in his flesh the mark of the covenant from the beginning of his life? So that his parents would confess and he would remember how God had brought into existence his covenant with Abraham and his descendants. That remembrance would time and again strengthen their belief that salvation on earth is accomplished exclusively by the power of the God who calls. And it would place their marital relationship in the light of God's government down through the generations. For they would understand that in spite of themselves, only by the grace of God, they with all of their

³⁴K. Blei (*De kinderdoop in diskussie*, 97) argues that children in Israel were covenant children by virtue by their birth. H. B. Kossen ("Verbond en besnijdenis bij Paulus in verband met de doop," 463) claims that infant baptism gives the appearance that God grants grace to children of Christian parents in a special way on the basis of their ancestry. The Canons of Dort 1.17 provides a far more careful formulation: the children of believers are holy "not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included." I have written more extensively about the power of God's calling in *De gemeente en haar liturgie*, 218-233.

creational capacities were being led along God's sacred salvation path. Nobody serves the work of salvation unless God himself makes them serviceable. That governance characterized their living. In this way an entire familial society bore the mark of God's plan of salvation.

Unique to the Anabaptist approach to this revelation of God's covenant with Abraham is interpreting the scope of this revelation in terms of dilemmas alien to the narrative itself. One of those dilemmas is the contrast between *birth* and *faith* as paths of entering the covenant in the Old Testament and the New Testament, respectively. Related to that is the contrast between the *natural* and the *spiritual* routes. We get the impression that in Genesis 17:7, God made a temporary concession to "nature" and natural birth, and through such birth God determined to employ a "physical" or "biological" element in the service to his saving work. In the dispensation of the Spirit, however, this God has elevated his work finally to the proper spiritual level.

Nevertheless, we must realize that nowhere in the old covenant has the power of the Holy Spirit been revealed to such a degree as in the birth of Isaac. Look how much faith was invested in this joyful expectation! What an active use of faith!

On the other hand, it is rather impossible, in view of developments in the New Testament, to maintain the position that the God of redemption is uninterested in using the creaturely route of marriage and procreation for his work of salvation. Christ has delivered the creation which had been condemned to barrenness, and has rendered it serviceable to God. So in Christ marriage and family have received back their purpose, and that is the foundation for the sanctification of life through the power of the Spirit (see, for example, Eph. 6:1-4, after Eph. 5:22-33; 1 Tim. 2:15; 4:3-5). Therefore, it is simply impossible to maintain that the social unit called "the family" supposedly has no instrumental value for God's redemptive work and is supposedly irrelevant for the progress of redemption in the new covenant.

The Anabaptist perspective understands that the circumcision occurring in Abraham's tent reaches its fulfillment in individual

regeneration, which is then the genuine, inner circumcision of the heart.³⁵

But in response to this view, we would posit the following:

- This is not something that is unique to the new covenant, since this is mentioned also in the Old Testament.
- Circumcision was fulfilled in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. There is no line connecting us with Abraham except the line that runs back through Christ. And this Christ presents himself to his people in the proclamation of the Word and in the "circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:12).

When people focus their attention on the individual experience of faith, this represents a reduced perspective and a subjective self-interest. That individual experience of faith is thought to contain the characteristic criterion for the formation of God's church in the new covenant. The phrase "you and your seed" from Genesis 17:7 is thought simply to represent a phenomenon unique to the Old Testament dispensation—a characteristic phenomenon appearing in an age when God gave shape to his redeeming work in the form of natural relationships like family and nation. The higher, spiritual level was supposedly reached in this age, now that God is interested only in the faith-decisions of believing individuals. According to this perspective, anybody who increases the membership of God's church with the aid of infant baptism is necessarily doing nothing else than forming a national church and is introducing a natural relationship (parents-children) as a constitutive factor into the formation of the church. This mode of action is thought not only to conflict with the nature of the church, but especially to undermine individual responsibility and to injure human freedom and capacity for decision.

Over against these views, we posit our conviction that Genesis 17:7 can never justify any genealogical pride or any reliance on one's ancestry. The narrative itself, along with its

³⁵See, for example, H. B. Kossen, "Verbond en besnijdenis bij Paulus in verband met de doop," 449ff.

context, shows this to be true. God does not constitute his church as a collection of pious individuals, each of whom has made the right faith-decision for himself. For it is not human decision, but divine determination, that governs the “constituting” of God’s church. Since Abraham God has had a people on earth, a people whom he has called into being from nothing. This is his one church that has existed down through the ages. To that people God is adding others whom he calls for that purpose. That is how the old tree obtains new branches (Rom. 11:16).

All these people who, together with their parents or by the ministry of missionaries, were privileged to become members of the church are identified and characterized in terms of *God’s calling*. What pagan-who-became-a-Christian would ever point to his faith-decision once he understands the work of God in his life? What church-member-who-was-baptized-as-a-child would ever boast in his ancestry when speaking about the privilege of his church membership? Each one is characterized by God’s calling and may be described as those *called (to be) saints* (see 1 Cor. 1:2). All together they are taken along by God, down God’s path, ransomed by Christ from the regime of death.

The question remains: Can the *children* of believers also be described as *called (to be) saints*? It is not their blood that makes them members of the church; nothing is known about their future faith; and the notion of a so-called “seed of regeneration” existing in their hearts is nothing but speculative theology.

Nevertheless, we need not hesitate to answer this question resoundingly in the affirmative. For these children live under the claim of God. Carried along by their parents, they too travel along down God’s sacred pathway. Even their birth stood under the power of God’s determination. God gave these children to their parents by means of the institution of marriage to which God had once again laid claim. These children belong to their parents, but these parents belong to Christ. Therefore, we may legitimately identify these children as “belonging to Christ”—together with their parents they are placed on the road traveled by those called (to be) saints (1 Cor. 7:14). That describes their

quality. If this were not so, then on the day of Pentecost the apostle Peter would not have included reference to the children in his preaching about the promised Spirit. But Acts 2:39 proves that the gift of the new covenant applies to the children of these Jewish listeners. Whereas these parents still had to turn from their sins against Christ, and whereas the filth of their past still had to be washed away, nevertheless, they together with their children are recipients of God's great gift.³⁶ In Acts 2 the structure of the Abrahamic covenant appears to be in force for bestowing the gift of the new covenant. Small wonder: all of Acts 2 reaches back to the story of God's great work for his people and for the nations—the work that began in Genesis 12.

* * * * *

The church of the new covenant is characterized by the work of Christ which brought redemption into existence before every individual faith-decision. This Christ is now proclaimed unto faith and conversion.

The baptism that began to be administered upon earth on the day of Pentecost has come to us from the hands of the risen Christ. This baptism he has made the medium between the history of redemption and the personal history of our lives. Religious individualism reverses this relationship, for in that perspective, baptism serves as the crowning of one's religious life history³⁷ and this baptism elevates this history to the level of the

³⁶In writing about Acts 2:38-39, H. B. Kossen argues that conversion is explicitly presupposed by baptism. To this correct observation he adds, however, that Acts 2:39 affirms "that God's promises given to Jewish ancestors, which had found their fulfillment in Jesus' work, still retained their validity for the Jews living then and in the future ('your children') provided they were converted and became baptized in order thereby to receive forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit." We disagree with using the word "provided." Kossen turns into a *condition* what the text stipulates as a *basis* for conversion [namely, "*because or since* the promise is for you and your children, repent and be baptized," *translator's note*]. Cf. H. B. Kossen, "De doop van de messiaanse gemeente," *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift*, 17 (1962-1963): 20.

³⁷In this connection, see the citation provided in footnote 10.

group and its experiences of salvation.³⁸ In this way, not only are relationships reversed, but more seriously, the nature of faith is radically twisted. For faith is not co-constitutive for redemption, but merely *receives* redemption.³⁹ Faith is not the human “contribution” for constituting the “covenant encounter” between God and man, but faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit in the context of the covenant. Faith is the very content of both the demand and the promise of the covenant: God grants what he demands, and gives himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in preaching and sacrament. Respecting the covenant structure of Genesis 17:7 will not result in a national church or in Judaism. But such respect does call us to a promissory preaching that summons listeners to conversion and faith. Acts 2:38-41 contains foundational instruction for the church’s preaching and for the church’s practice of baptism.

The Reformed versus the Anabaptists

The doctrine of baptism should be presented not only with the help of exegetical and doctrinal explanations. Chapters could also be written detailing perspectives involving liturgical, historical, and pastoral aspects of this doctrine. The scope of this essay, however, does not permit us to write these chapters. We wish to conclude with five observations about the struggle between the Reformed and the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century.⁴⁰

³⁸According to Kossen, “dying with Christ in baptism” is strictly a personal matter. One becomes a Christian as an individual, and baptism cannot occur apart from his decision (“De doop van de messiaanse gemeente,” 11-18).

³⁹Cf. A. Oepke, s.v. *παῖς*, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5, trans. and ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967), 648-650.

⁴⁰For a broader orientation, we refer the reader to W. van ’t Spijker, “De eenheid van oud en nieuw verbond bij Martin Bucer,” in *Wegen en gestalten in het gereformeerd protestantisme*, ed. by W. Balke et al. (Amsterdam, 1976), 47-60, and to the brochure by the same author, *Doop in plaats van besnijdenis* (Goudriaan, 1982).

1. When we become acquainted with the exposition of the Reformers, we are struck by the hesitations and uncertainties they display with regard to infant baptism. When the Anabaptists began to deny the legitimacy of infant baptism so radically and to oppose it so vigorously, the leading spokesmen of the Reformation seemed to have been deeply embarrassed. Whether we read the replies of Zwingli or Luther,⁴¹ we repeatedly see them casting about for effective arguments. Some of their lines of argument seem rather weak and vulnerable. Subsequently, even in Calvin's expositions we still encounter weak arguments, especially the attempt to prove that infants in one way or another may be called "believers" and may be counted among believers.⁴²

For that reason we are the more impressed by the fact that in the midst of all this uncertainty, the strong conviction had surfaced, already at the very beginning of this dispute, regarding *the unity of the covenants*. It was primarily their opposition to the Anabaptists that stimulated the precursors of the Reformation especially in Zurich (Zwingli and Bullinger) to develop the doctrine of the covenant.⁴³ They were evidently not prepared to

⁴¹Zwingli wrote *Von der Taufe, von der Wiedertaufe und von der Kindertaufe* (1525) and *In Catabaptistarum strophas elenchns* (1527). Luther wrote *Von der Wiedertaufe an zwei Pfarrherrn* (1528).

⁴²One can read about these uncertainties among the Reformers in, for example, *Täuferium und Reformation in der Schweiz*, by J. Yoder (vol. 1: *Die Gespräche zwischen Täufern und Reformatoren, 1523-1528*) (Karlsruhe, 1962), 34, 60, 83, 111; "Die Anfänge des schweizerischen Täuferiums in reformierten Kongregationalismus," in *Umstrittenes Täuferium, 1525-1975*, ed. by H.-J. Goertz (Neue Forschungen; Göttingen, 1975), 36-37; *Die Zwinglische Reformation im Rahmen der europäischen Kirchengeschichte*, G.W. Locher (Göttingen, 1979), 240; *De leerstellige strijd tusschen Nederlandsche Gereformeerden en Doopgezinden in de zestiende eeuw*, J. H. Wessel (Assen, 1945), 227. Regarding uncertainties in Calvin, cf. *De kinderdoop en het Nieuwe Testament*, G. de Ru, 3rd ed. (Wageningen, 1968), 246; the essay by J. van Genderen in *Rondom de doopvont*, 276ff.; *De voorzeide leer*, C. Vonk, vol. IIIb (Barendrecht, 1956), 312-322. Confusion about infant baptism has actually continued up to our own day; cf. the essay by C. Graafland in *Rondom de doopvont*, 446ff.

⁴³For Luther, see his *Von der Wiedertaufe* (WA 26, 158, 164, 169). In 1520 Luther had already expressed himself concerning the unity of baptism and circumcision in his *De captivitate babilonica praeludium* (cf. WA 6, 532). For

throw out infant baptism as a papist ceremony. They sensed that this baptism had not been invented by the pope and thus had deeper roots than other customs that had been handed down over the years. A salutary combination of the Swiss doctrine of the covenant with the Lutheran insight into the promissory character of redemption led to the fortuitous formulations of the Heidelberg Catechism. These formulations are all the more striking when we remember all those uncertainties at the start of the Reformation.⁴⁴

2. The struggle between the Anabaptists and the Reformers disclosed a deep difference of insight about the way God constitutes his church in this world. In Zurich the Anabaptists opposed infant baptism when, in opposition to the existing national church situation, they sought with great zeal to realize their ideal of a “church of saints.” Here is where the religiosity of the individual came to form the core of the Anabaptist perspective on the church.⁴⁵ The effort of the Anabaptists was spurred by their opposition against the government and its influence upon the course of events within the church. After all, what does the kingdom of God have in common with the kingdom of this world?

The Reformers’ resistance against this effort was not an expression of medieval conservatism, but a protest against constructing another entrance into the church. In the view of the Reformers, this emphasis on the necessity of faith and conversion focused attention on the religious subject, an

Zwingli, see G. W. Locher, *Die Zwinglische Reformation im Rahmen der europäischen Kirchengeschichte*, 147, 220, 243ff., 256ff., 261ff. For M. Bucer, see Footnote 40.

⁴⁴Cf. W. H. Neuser, *Die Tauflehre des Heidelberger Katechismus* (Munich, 1967), 33ff.

⁴⁵Cf. G. W. Locher, *Die Zwinglische Reformation im Rahmen der europäischen Kirchengeschichte*, 243-245; J. H. Wessel, *De leerstellige strijd tusschen Nederlandsche Gereformeerden en Doopsgezinden in de zestiende eeuw*, 8ff., 217ff.; F. Blanke, *Aus der Welt der Reformation* (Zurich, 1960), 75 (in connection with the letter of Conrad Grebel to Thomas Muntzer, dated 5 September 1524).

emphasis that twisted the relationship between God and man and turned faith into a new work.⁴⁶

At this point we have reached the most fundamental feature of the dispute between the Reformed and the Anabaptists. That basic feature involves the work of the Holy Spirit within man, and the place of the Holy Spirit's work in the entire redemptive work of God. At the same time, we again encounter the relationship between the promise and the demand of the covenant. We really need to pause for a moment at this intersection of ideas and insights.

(a) We begin with the proposition that in his grace God deals with us in terms of promise and demand. This divine grace is active within human experience also in the demand to believe and repent. It simply cannot be true that in the promise God bestows his "share" in covenant fellowship in order then to activate us by means of his demand to make our "contribution," so that we share in bringing about the so-called "covenantal event." The covenant is borne each and every moment by the grace of the triune God. When God enters into this relationship with man, by means of both promise and demand (= calling), God lays claim to our lives. He does this through Christ and the Spirit.

(b) For what, after all, is the concrete demand of the covenant? God calls people to put off the old man and to put on the new man (Eph. 4:22, 24). Why? The Scripture's answer is surprising: because the old man *has been* crucified with Christ and the new man *has been* raised with him (Rom. 6:6-11; Eph. 2:5-6). Anyone who has been crucified with Christ and has died with him (Rom. 6:2, 6, 8; 7:6; 2 Cor. 5:15; Gal. 2:19-20; 5:24; 6:14; Col. 3:3) may and can and must then put to death those "members" that are on the earth (Col. 3:5). We must die because we have died. We may and must arise because we are resurrected. This is how we repeatedly *receive* through the Spirit what we *have* in Christ. The demand of the covenant functions in this connection as the instrument of the Spirit.

⁴⁶Luther said, "Es ist aber ein Werkeufel bei ihnen, der gibt Glauben vor und meint doch das Werk . . ." (*WA* 26, 161).

(c) It is precisely baptism that ties together both levels that we are describing here. Baptism establishes our calling on the basis of God's activity in Christ and through the Spirit. By this means and on this basis baptism addresses us.

The cleansing through the blood and Spirit of Christ is accomplished for us and must at the same time repeatedly be performed upon and within us. In the sanctifying of our lives it is first of all God's *promise* that is fulfilled and salvation takes shape in our lives. Baptism is the instrument whereby our life story is placed under the claim of salvation history in Christ. At this point any distinction between promise and demand can be merely theoretical. The secret of Christian living lies in the unity between Christ and the Spirit. On both levels, that of salvation history and of personal life history, they complete the work of redemption upon and within us. The unity of promise and demand is founded upon that concord.

(d) In our view, the varied language of the Heidelberg Catechism regarding the meaning of baptism is closely related to this. For the Catechism talks about *being* washed (see *A.* 69, *Q.* 70, and *A.* 73), about *being* washed with Christ's blood and Spirit (*Q.* 71), about our sins *being* removed (*A.* 73), and about salvation from sins *being* promised (*A.* 74). This language reflects the lively language of Scripture itself and of faith's fellowship with God.⁴⁷

(e) In all of this, we are dealing with the dominant grace of God. It is God who establishes the relationship between himself and us, and he does so long before our religious functioning. In his call the promise comes with the demand to believe, but simultaneously his promise contains the gift of faith and sanctification. *Answer* 74 of the Heidelberg Catechism formulates this quite fortuitously by saying, ". . .since both redemption from sin and *the Holy Spirit, the Author of faith*, are through the blood of Christ promised to them no less than to adults"

3. At this juncture, few words are needed to explain why we must oppose the suggestion that "being baptized" must rest upon

⁴⁷Regarding the cooperation of Christ and the Spirit in redemption, see also especially Heidelberg Catechism, *Q/A*s 1, 69, 70, and 86.

a person's free choice or decision. Such "free choice" is an illegitimate notion when it is introduced right at that moment when we are called away from ourselves to focus upon God's free determination. In that case baptism becomes an "encounter event" arising out of a kind of human voluntary capacity, so that baptism should really be seen as a divine-human act.⁴⁸ This kind of baptism is basically a salute to sophisticated modern man and to his religious individuality. In that case, such religiosity becomes the foundation of the church. But anyone who confesses that Christ gathers his church by his Spirit and Word will be unable to shift the heart of the matter from God's call to human religiosity.

Our opposition against the modern Anabaptist perspective concerning the nature and basis of baptism in no way signifies our denial of human activity. Such activity is exactly what God calls for in his covenant dealings with man. The difference between the Reformed and the Anabaptists does not lie at the point of the need for human activity. Rather, it lies in the nature of our regard for this need. The difference is this: Must we honor God's claim upon man, or must we pay homage to human religious sophistication and to our human capacity for choosing? These questions relate to the issue, which we have already discussed, of believing response to God's promise.

4. In this connection we must consider the argument that even the Reformers wanted to respect as fully as possible the "two-sidedness" of the administration of the sacrament. For example, from Calvin we read:

It seems to me that a simple and proper definition [of a sacrament] would be to say that it is an outward sign by which the Lord seals

⁴⁸For example: K. Blei, *De kinderdoop in diskussie*, p. 27, "One may characterize baptism (in agreement with the New Testament witness) as foundation and beginning of being a Christian, or as the transition to the new life-in-Christ, as engrafting in Christ and his church. Provided that one keeps in view then that such a "transition" and "engrafting" does not occur apart from the one being baptized. He himself is the one who turns to Christ and to the church, who presents himself for baptism and begins a new walk of life. Thus, baptism is at one and the same time something God does and something man does, together."

on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men (*Institutes*, 4.14.1; cf. extensively in 4.14.19).

What Zwingli had initially indicated as the only meaning of the sacrament (the sacrament as “Pflichtzeichen,” token of duty) cannot possibly capture its full meaning. For then the sacrament is in danger of being eliminated as an instrument of God’s grace. Not the human subject, but God is the one acting in the sacrament. But Zwingli’s intention was certainly integrated into Calvin’s description quoted above.⁴⁹

In the light of this definition, it is understandable that people questioned whether infant baptism possessed the features of a sacrament formulated here. After all, the child does not confess faith and commit himself to purity and holiness of life. Rather, it is the parents who confess their faith and accept the stipulations of baptism.

In reply to this question, we would say the following:

(a) It is striking that Calvin neither altered nor abbreviated his definition of a sacrament for the sake of opposing the Anabaptists. At first glance, he opens himself to attack on the issue of infant baptism. But neither Calvin nor Zwingli ever left room for the Anabaptist perspective.

(b) This fact can be explained only when Calvin’s phrase “mutual agreement” (*Institutes*, 4.14.19) is understood to occupy a

⁴⁹We find something similar in the Little Catechism (*Catechesis minor*, 1562) written by Ursinus, *Q/A* 54, where we have the following description of the sacraments: “Ceremonies have been instituted by God in order that, by means of these—as it were—visible pledges and public testimonies, all believers might be reminded and assured concerning the grace promised them in the gospel, and also that by these ceremonies they in turn might obligate themselves unto faith and a holy life and might differ from unbelievers.” (“Sunt ceremoniae a Deo institutae ut iis tanquam visibilibus pignoribus et publicis testimoniis omnes credentes de gratia ipsi in Euangelio promissa admoneat et confirmet; ac ipsi vicissim se ad fidem et sanctam vitam obligent et ab infidelibus discernant.”) See also “Zur Sakramentslehre des Heidelberger Katechismus nach den Fragen 65-68,” by H. Hesse, in *Theologische Aufsätze* (Festschrift for K. Barth; Munich, 1936), 467-476.

different place than it does in Anabaptist thinking. Apparently Calvin could easily shift this “mutuality” to the moment of public profession of faith. Nevertheless, in so doing he did not make this profession of faith a complement of baptism (in a way similar to the sacrament of confirmation). He writes rather tersely about infant baptism:

Still, in showing that the testimony of a good conscience underlies the truth of circumcision, yet at the same time commanding the infants to be circumcised, he clearly indicates that circumcision is conferred, in this case, for the time to come. Accordingly, in infant baptism nothing more of present effectiveness must be required than to confirm and ratify the covenant made with them by the Lord. The remaining significance of this sacrament will afterward follow at such time as God himself foresees (*Institutes*, 4.16.21).

Calvin could use this line of reasoning only because he understood the core of the sacrament—namely, the sacramental activity of God—to be fully present also with infant baptism. In that activity God certainly envisions this double activity—for God asks for and promises public profession of faith—but nothing of that response appears yet from the one being baptized. It seems, then, that we should speak, in connection with this point, of a certain sequence of phases that occurs in the course of life and at various stages of life of the one baptized. Human mutuality functions in this connection not as an independent, second component of the baptism event, but as a human response subordinated to God’s activity and brought into existence through God’s activity in his time. It is evident that Calvin’s understanding of mutuality did not arise from any notion of bipolarity wherein, after describing the divine “component,” the element of human subjectivity comes into its own. Apparently Calvin had in view the continuous activity of God. Human “mutual agreement” proceeded from that divine activity, and this covenant activity of God is not subjectivistically circumscribed.

- This has consequences also for the place and function of public profession of faith at the baptism of adults. This

profession is certainly required for administering the sacrament, but it is neither part of nor the basis for the sacrament.

- The fact that this mutuality is not mentioned in the definition given in Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25, *Answer* 66, is itself remarkable. Presumably we should explain this as an attempt at rapprochement with the Lutherans.⁵⁰ This element is indeed contained in Ursinus' *Commentary*, and in the liturgical Form for Baptism used in the Palatinate. In our opinion, the fact that this element could easily be omitted confirms our argument against the notion of bipolarity.
- We need to object to the claim that in Heidelberg Catechism, *Answer* 74, the doctrine of the covenant is all of a sudden being summoned to the fore in order to defend infant baptism.⁵¹ Anyone who supposes that Ursinus thought "promise" and "covenant" were identical concepts⁵² and who claims that *Answer* 74 of the Catechism is referring explicitly to adults, cannot escape the force of these arguments leveled against infant baptism. How often did not this same Ursinus refer to the covenant in his treatment of the sacraments in the *Large Catechism*?⁵³ So there is more justification for asking: Why isn't "covenant" mentioned explicitly in Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 25 and 26?

5. A final comment in this connection involves the phrase used in the classic Reformed liturgical Form for the Baptism of Infants, namely, that children of believing parents "ought to be baptized." Throughout the years, vigorous objection has been raised against this phrase. Such objection is easily understandable

⁵⁰On this point, see H. Hesse, "Zur Sakramentslehre des Heidelberger Katechismus nach den Fragen 65-68," 474ff., and G. P. Hartvelt, *Tastbaar evangelie* (Aalten, n.d.), 10-11.

⁵¹K. Blei, *De kinderdoop in diskussie*, 42; cf. also *Dopers-calvinistisch gesprek in Nederland* (?s-Gravenhage, 1982), 41.

⁵²Cf. E. K. Sturm, *Der junge Zacharias Ursin. Sein Weg vom Philippismus zum Calvinismus (1534-1562)* (Neukirchen, 1972), 140-141.

⁵³Cf. *Answers* 273, 276, 277, and 279 concerning the sacraments, and *Answers* 284 and 288 concerning baptism.

if baptism does not rest upon an institution of Christ and if infant baptism represents nothing more than a respectable tradition or edifying ecclesiastical ceremony.

But if the covenant statute of Genesis 17:1-14 acquaints us with the will and work-style of God today, then there is no room for “equally valid alternatives” to the baptism of those who are infants or toddlers. The obligation to circumcise his children was *the* act to which Abraham was summoned within the covenant. To omit this act was to break covenant. In light of this, the obligation of parents to affirm their faith in God once again when they present their child at the baptismal font can hardly be simply a voluntary matter. God calls and sanctifies his people in the life relationship within which they are born and grow up. It is not our place, when it comes to the “circumcision of Christ,” to invent alternatives which the church can “offer” to her members. Such voluntariness can never be a rule of life for the church who has been placed by God under his claim.