

Baptism

A. A. Hodge

Archibald Alexander Hodge was born July 18, 1823 and died November 12, 1886. He was Professor in Systematic Theology at Princeton Seminary from 1877 until his parting to be with the Lord. Due to the request of many of his students and followers, Professor Hodge gave a series of nineteen popular lectures, of which this is one, in Philadelphia in the early part of 1886. The complete series of those lectures can be found in the Banner of Truth edition of Hodge's *Evangelical Theology*

As we have seen before, in Lecture IX., that the Church and Kingdom of God rest upon a covenant, it is evidently appropriate that Christ should provide visible seals by which that covenant should be ratified and its benefits symbolized to all who accept its terms. We have seen also, under Lecture XIV., that the true Church is designed by God to organize itself under his law, under varying historical conditions, in outward visible communities: it is evident, therefore, that it is to be expected that Christ should give to his Church certain divinely-appointed and universally-recognized badges of membership by which they are to be distinguished from others.

The word “sacrament” is not in the Bible, and therefore the meaning of that term, and of the other terms by which the class comprising Baptism and the Lord’s Supper have been designated, must be determined from the general usage of the Church.

I. They have been called “mysteries” by a very natural association. The mysteries were the secrets of Grecian religious rites, which could not possibly be discovered by the uninitiated, but which were, while jealously guarded from the outsider, gradually revealed to the initiated in proportion to his grade of membership. The early pastors of the primitive Church were surrounded by heathen communities. On the Sabbath days their congregations at first consisted of three distinct classes—the heathen inquirers, the catechumens, and the communicants. After the sermon had been preached, with singing and prayer, the general audience of the uninitiated heathen were dismissed with the formula, *Ite, missa est!*—“Go, it is dismissed.” Then the catechumens, or candidates for baptism, the first degree of Christian profession, were instructed, and afterward dismissed with the same formula, *Ite, missa est!* Then only the communicants of the second or highest grade of Christian profession remained, and they together celebrated the most sacred rite of the Lord’s Supper, at which none of the uninitiated were allowed to remain even as witnesses. Hence the sacraments came by analogy to be regarded as the Christian mysteries, or innermost secrets unveiled only to the initiated; and hence, likewise, the Lord’s Supper itself came to be called the “Mass,” from its being introduced by two repetitions, and followed by a third repetition, of the dismissal formula, *Ite, missa est!*

These rites have more generally and permanently been called “sacraments,” which has mistakenly been taken as the Latin equivalent of the Greek mystery. The *sacramentum* was anything that renders sacred or binds, as a bail or a soldier’s oath. These sacred rites seal and publicly consummate a Christian’s profession of faith and allegiance. They bind him to a service, like a citizen’s oath of loyalty, which was obligatory upon him antecedently in consequence of his birth.

In the same general sense these special rites have been called, especially among Scotch Presbyterians, “sealing ordinances.” By engagement therein the professing Christian openly signifies and seals his profession of faith and promise of service: At the same time, by the admission of the individual to the privilege of participating in them, the Church, through its officers, signifies and seals its recognition of the covenanting believer as an accepted member of the Church. It is for this reason that the right of admitting to or of excluding from these “sealing ordinances” is called “the power of the keys,” the power of admission or of exclusion, “of binding or of loosing,” of which our Lord speaks in his address to Peter (Matt. xvi. 19). And for this reason also the right of administering these “sealing ordinances,” which are the keys that open or shut the doors of the visible Church, has always been rigidly confined to the ordained ministry or highest class of church-officers, thus qualified to act in this matter—not as individuals, but as representatives of the whole body of believers and the executors according to law of their corporate will.

II. It is a more important question to ask, what are the real nature and design of these sacraments in the economy of the Christian Church?

Sacraments are symbols, symbolical actions, wherein outward physical signs represent inward invisible grace. The signs consist of the elements, and of the sacramental actions of the minister and of the recipient in relation to these elements. They are symbolical transactions, in which Christ and the benefits of his salvation are represented, sealed, and applied to believers. The grace symbolized is purchased by Christ, is conveyed and applied by the Holy Ghost, and is received by faith. That grace, therefore, as inward and invisible, belongs to the spiritual Church as such, whether organized into visible societies or not. But the sacraments, wherein this inward invisible grace is represented by outward physical signs, belong obviously to those visible societies or organized churches into which the spiritual children of God are gathered. They can have no other sphere. They are signs and seals to men in the flesh of things which relate to the spiritual world. But the outward sign has no pertinency except in relation to the condition of men in the flesh, and sustaining the relations of members of visible organized societies. Their need and use grow out of the two facts—(1) that as long as we are in the flesh the most profound impressions are made upon our souls through our bodily senses; and (2) that as long as we are associated together in these outward visible organizations we need visible, easily recognizable badges of fellowship and seals of a common loyalty.

These symbols are, in the *first* place, natural. Circumcision and the washing the body with water in baptism are obviously natural signs, significant of the need of a second

birth—a new birth, which will be like life from the dead; a life distinguished from the natural life by spirituality. The sacrifice of the paschal lamb, and the sprinkling of his blood on the doorposts, and the eating of his flesh at a sacrificial feast as people in fellowship with God, and the breaking and eating of the bread and the pouring out and drinking of the wine in the Lord's Supper, are obviously natural signs, significant of our participation in all the sacrificial benefits of Christ's redemption.

In the *second* place, being selected by God as natural symbols of the spiritual graces represented, they are ordained by him to be so regarded and treated on his authority by his Church for ever. Their suggestive and edifying power is due to both of these facts—the natural likeness and the divine appointment.

The design of these sacraments is obvious from their nature and uses, and is, moreover, clearly taught in Scripture.

1st. They are effective objective exhibitions of the central truths of the Gospels. Like pictures, they impressively set forth to the eye and the imagination the same great truths which the Word of God read or preached sets forth to the ear. Their use has proved the wisdom of their appointment. The *rationale* lies in the constitution of human nature as embracing rational spirits incarnate in animal bodies.

2nd. They are badges of church-membership, and hence at the same time of our relation to Christ as our Teacher, Redeemer, and King, and of our relation to one another as beneficiaries of the same redemption, learners in the same school, brethren in the same family, subjects of the same kingdom, and heirs of the same inheritance. They discharge the same offices as do the pass-signs of the secret societies, the uniform of the army, the standards of the battle, the flag of the nation. They give definite visibility to the professing organized Church of Jesus Christ on earth, at once in the eyes of its own members and of all outsiders.

3rd. They were also designed by Christ to be the seals of his covenant with men. Every covenant implies two parties, who mutually give and receive pledges. A seal is an outward visible thing or action attached by appointment of government, which recognizes and consummates a contract, rendering the contract even more sacred by the governmental recognition. In these sacraments Christ seals his mediatorial undertaking for us, and pledges by an objective declaration, in every case audible and visible, our salvation on the condition of our really and spiritually doing what we in appearance do in receiving the sacrament. We at the same time swear a sacred oath, enacted by word and act, to put ourselves absolutely into Christ's hands, to receive his full salvation, and to be consecrated to his service.

4th. They were also ordained by Christ to be means of grace—not the only means, in the absence of which grace is not given, but real, divinely-appointed means, the use of which is obligatory and most useful to all Christians; the appointed instruments in the hands of the Holy Spirit of effecting and distributing grace to men severally as he wills. "The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his Church the

benefits of his mediation, are all his ordinances ; especially the word, sacraments, and prayer” (Larger Cat., Ques. 154). Christ uses these sacraments, not only to represent and seal, but also actually to apply, the benefits of his redemption to believers (Shorter Cat., Ques. 92). This efficiency as means of grace does not, of course, inhere in the sacramental elements or actions themselves, nor in the merit or intention of the administrator, but always in the present gracious volition of the Holy Ghost, whose instruments they are; just as the efficiency of the axe or hammer or sword is due to the will and power of the man who wields it. The axe cuts down the tree because it is adapted to cut wood, and because it is energetically and skilfully wielded by a strong man. The sacrament acts as means of conveying grace, because its signs and actions are adapted to affect the mind and the heart and the will of men in the right way at the same time, and because the Holy Ghost, who works in us to will and to do of his good pleasure, uses it as he wills, and to effect his own purpose.

III. It is well known that the Romanists hold that there are, under the new law or covenant, seven sacraments—namely, baptism, confirmation, the Lord’s Supper, penance, marriage, orders, extreme unction; although they have always acknowledged that baptism and the Lord’s Supper constitute a pre-eminently sacred class by themselves—as Thomas Aquinas calls them, *potissima sacramenta*. All these, with the exception of penance and extreme unction, are admitted by Protestants to be important divine ordinances. The only question between Protestants and Catholics at this point relates to the proper extension of the word “sacrament,” which is not found in the Bible. The true way of putting the question on the Protestant side is not to raise a controversy as to the meaning of a non- biblical word, but to ask, Are there any other divine ordinances of the same class, possessing the same qualities, and sustaining the same relations, as baptism and the Lord’s Supper? We Protestants answer, emphatically, No!

That these special ordinances were designed to be perpetual is as plain as language and reason can make it. In the first place, this is antecedently probable, because the reason for their original institution still continues. In the second place, this continued use, in the case of each sacrament, is specifically commanded: “Go ye into all the world, discipling all nations, baptizing them,” etc., and, “Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of this world-age” (Matt. xxviii. 19, 20; Mark xvi. 15); “Do this in remembrance of me ;” and the inspired comment of the apostle, “For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till he come “ (1 Cor. xi. 26). These are, therefore, to continue until the second coming of Christ. In the third place, the apostles practised the use of both sacraments as long as they lived. And in the *fourth* place, the entire Christian Church, under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, has continued their observance in unbroken continuity unto the present time.

IV. BAPTISM.

All the world knows the vast volume of controversy and of controversial literature which has been generated in the Church around this immense subject. We have, on the one hand, the great body of the historical Christian churches, and on the other hand, the Protestants of Protestants, our Baptist brethren. In this point of view the advantage

appears to be on our side. But this advantage is very greatly abated when we come to estimate the average quality of the two great contestant bodies in mass, and recognize the fact that these Baptist brethren stand among those occupying the very foremost rank in intelligence, learning, piety, effective usefulness, and universal and strict fidelity to the Word of God. The questions in debate relate to fundamental points. 1st. What is baptism? What, precisely, are we commanded to do when we are commanded to baptize? 2nd. What classes of persons are we to baptize? These Lectures have nothing to do with controversy. We propose, therefore, in the most friendly spirit toward all those who differ from us, to state with perfect simplicity our own belief as to what is the truth on both these subjects.

[I.] We believe that the command to baptize is precisely and only a command *to wash with water* as a symbol of spiritual regeneration and cleansing into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. The essential parts of the external sacrament are, consequently, (1) the formula; (2) the element; (3) the action; (4) the sense in which the symbol is interpreted.

(1.) It is essential to the validity of this ordinance that it should be administered “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” This is certain—(a) because of the words of the great commission in Matt. xxviii. 19; (b) from the essential significancy of the rite. Besides being a symbol of spiritual purification, it is essentially, as the rite of initiation into the Christian Church, a covenanting ordinance, whereby the recipient recognizes and pledges his allegiance to God in that character and in those relations in which he has revealed himself to us in the plan of salvation. The formula of baptism, therefore, is a summary of the whole Scripture doctrine of the Triune Jehovah as he has chosen to reveal himself to us in all those relations which the several Persons of the Trinity graciously sustain to the believer in the scheme of redemption.

(2.) The element, as is universally acknowledged, is water. Water is to the physical system of this earth and to the life upon its surface what the blood is in the animal organism. When water is withheld, the whole earth becomes first clouded with dust, and then parched to death, and finally becomes a barren desert. When the water is copiously restored, the face of nature is purified, and the desert is transformed into the garden of the Lord. Water as the universal bearer of life and solvent is the natural type of spiritual regeneration and sanctification. If water, therefore, is absent, there is no baptism, because the command to baptize is the command to wash with water.

(3.) The element and the action by which it is used and applied constitute what is technically called the “matter of baptism”—that is, the thing done by some person who performs the rite. This we believe to be simply a washing with water. The whole rite is a symbol of spiritual cleansing. The thing to be done, therefore, is to wash. The manner of doing it is, therefore, necessarily accidental and outside of the command. This we fully believe—

(a) Because the Greek words used to express the command *baptizw* (*baptizo*) and *bavptw* (*bapto*), although their root-meaning is to immerse in any liquid, have come to

mean generally the producing of the effect for the sake of which the liquid is applied—for example, to wash, or to tinge, or to dye—no matter in what manner the liquid is applied to the subject operated upon. The word *vivptw* (*vipto*), to wash, and the word *baptivzw* (*baptizo*), are used interchangeably in the New Testament (Matt. xv. 2; Mark vii. 1-15; Luke xi. 37-39. See also 2 Kings v. 13, 14 and Titus iii. 5).

(b) These words are unquestionably used in the New Testament in a great variety of connections in which they cannot emphasize any one mode of applying the water, as the “washing of cups, and pots, and brazen vessels, and of tables” (Mark vii. 4), and the baptizing of Moses “in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor. x. 1, 2). The “divers washings” of the first tabernacle (Heb. ix. 10) we know to have been effected chiefly by sprinkling and pouring (Heb. ix. 13-21; Ex. xxx. 17-21).

(c) In all probability, the original manner of applying the water in Christian baptism was by pouring the water out of the hollow of the hand, or out of a shell or small vessel, without any emphasis or special signification attached to the manner in which the water was applied. This we regard as probable, because the prevailing modes of purification among the Jews were the pouring of water and the sprinkling of blood or ashes (Lev. viii. 30; xiv. 7, 51 Heb. ix. 13-22). The personal ablutions of the priests were performed at the brazen laver, from which the water poured forth through spouts or cocks (1 Kings vii. 38, 39; 2 Chron. iv. 6). Pouring water out of a vessel upon the hands, feet, or head of the person has been the method of applying water for purposes of purification from the earliest age to the present time in all the Oriental world from the Ganges to the Bosphorus. The earliest rude remains of Christian art in the Catacombs represent John as baptizing on the side of a stream of water by affusion.

(d) The outstanding essential fact, about which there can be no controversy, is that baptism with water is a symbol of baptism by the Holy Ghost. The one signifies what the other effects—that is, the cleansing the soul from the guilt and pollution of sin (John iii. 5; Titus iii. 5; Acts ii. 38; xxii. 16; 1 Cor. vi. 11; Eph. v. 26). It is the washing of the body corresponding to the “washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost.” John and the apostles baptized, and the modern minister baptizes, with water; but Christ baptizes us with the Holy Ghost (Luke iii. 16; Acts i. 5; xi. 16; xxii. 16; 1 Cor. xii. 13).. The one is the shadow, the other is the substance.

(e) Everywhere in the New Testament the connection in which the baptism with water is spoken of indicates the fact that it symbolizes the baptism of the Holy Ghost, and implies spiritual purification. In John iii. 22-30 the question debated between some of John’s disciples and the Jews as to baptism is expressly defined to be a question concerning purification. Men were exhorted to be baptized in order to wash away their sins. It is declared that men must be born of water and of the Spirit, and that baptism as well as faith is an essential condition of salvation. The effect of baptism is declared to be purification (2 Kings v. 13, 14; Judith xii. 7; Luke xi. 37-39).

(f) The metaphorical representation given in Scripture of the Spirit’s influence, of which baptism is the outward sign, never implies that the mode of the application is essential.

The gift of the Holy Ghost was the grace signified (Acts ii. 1-4, 32, 33 ; x. 44-48 ; xi. 15, 16). The fire, which did not immerse them, but appeared as cloven tongues and “sat upon each one of them,” was the symbol of that grace. Jesus was himself the baptizer, who now fulfilled the prediction of John the Baptist that he should baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire. The gift of the Holy Ghost is set forth alike in the Old and New Testaments in such terms as “came from heaven,” “poured out,” “shed forth,” “fell on them “ (Isa. xlv. 3; lli. 1 5 Ezek. xxxvi. 25-27; Joel ii. 28, 29).

(g) The metaphorical illustrations of the effects and benefits of baptism given in the New Testament do not lay any emphasis upon nor suggest any importance as attaching to the mode of applying the water in baptism. We are said “to be born of water and of the Spirit;” to “have put on Christ” as a garment in baptism; to be “planted together or generated together;” “to be buried with him by baptism into death” (John iii. 5; Gal. iii. 27; Rom. vi.3-5). These, none of them, represent baptism itself, but all alike refer to the spiritual effects of that grace which water-baptism symbolizes. In baptism we symbolically and professedly receive the Holy Ghost. The indwelling of the Holy Ghost unites us vitally to Christ. Union with Christ involves our being “generated or grafted together with him into one vital organism;” our putting on Christ as our righteousness; our being united with him federally, so that his death is our death and his rising to newness of life ours also; as he is a Priest, we are priests; as he is a Prophet, we are prophets; as he is a King, we are kings. All this and much more is true, but none of it even suggests the manner in which the water shall be applied in baptism.

(h) The Christian Church as a great historic body has always felt itself free in regard to this question. In the Eastern churches pouring has prevailed from immemorial times. The Greek church has always insisted on immersion. The Roman Catholic and Protestant historic churches admit both forms. During all the more modern freer and more evangelical ages the tendency toward baptizing by sprinkling has increased and become more general. The general body of Christians have always felt that as the mode of the application of the water in baptism was not of the essence of the commandment, they were free to do in the matter as convenience or local custom suggested.

(i) it is in the highest degree incongruous with the genius of the Christian religion and with the general analogy of its institutions that the mere manner of applying water as symbolical of purification should be considered of any importance. This religion is pre-eminently spiritual and reasonable, and not external or formal. It is designed for all men of all climates, ages, and conditions, and to be applied to individuals and communities under all conceivable circumstances. The external mode of performing a rite is insisted upon in no other instance. Christ and his apostles have left no prescriptions as to the form of church government, nor as to the manner of induction into church offices. No hints even as to a liturgy or form of prayer or order of general service of the sanctuary are given in their writings. Neither posture in prayer nor form of psalmody is prescribed. The questions as to the use of instrumental music, robes, and written or extemporaneous prayers, are left absolutely indeterminate. In the case of the sister sacrament of the Lord’s Supper the manner of celebrating it, by absolutely universal

consent of all Christians, has been left to the free selection of each ecclesiastical community, some receiving it lying on couches, as the apostles did who received it from the hands of Christ, and some kneeling, and some standing, and some sitting; some using unleavened bread after the original example, and others insisting upon the bread of every-day life.

(j) The case standing thus, as we think, as above stated, it is evident that the only point in connection with the mode of baptism is to insist upon it that the mode is an accident of no importance at all. The only serious mistake that possibly can be made in the premises is that of insisting upon some one of the many possible modes as absolutely essential to the integrity of the rite. The essence of the thing is to wash with water as a symbol “of the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost.” Everything other than this or more than this necessarily confuses the doctrine and obscures the impression of the truth. The simple command stands, and embraces all Christians:

“Go, wash with water into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost;” and “He who baptizes with the Holy Ghost and with fire will be with you always, even to the end of the world.”

[II.] Who are to be baptized?

There are two principles applying to the solution of this problem which appear to us to be very clear and unquestionable.

The *first* of these principles is, that baptism is a sacramental action representing an inward invisible grace. Consequently, the outward action ought never consciously and intentionally to be applied where the inward invisible grace is absent. There could be no farce more profane, no empty show more ghastly, than that of sealing the form of a covenant where there was no real promise, of applying an outward symbol of spiritual life and grace where all spiritual life and grace are absent. Such mockery would transform the sacred pledges of God’s truth into a lie.

The *second* principle, which we affirm to be no less obvious and certain, is, that the baptism with water is itself an outward visible sign, to be applied by human agents who are incapable of reading the hearts of men, and who have no power of conveying, and no authority of absolutely pledging, the spiritual gifts which God retains in his own hand. It follows, consequently, that in practice, while the sign should never intentionally be applied where the grace is absent, there cannot, however, be any infallible connection between the sign and the grace. God alone reads the hearts of men and dispenses the invisible grace, and men who cannot read the heart alone dispense the outward visible signs of the sacrament. It follows that these human ministers of God’s will must administer these rites upon certain presumptions—that is, they must follow certain divinely-appointed signs or indications which raise in each case the presumption that the parties concerned are either now or to be hereafter the parties to whom the invisible spiritual grace signified belongs. It is perfectly plain that every human society, whether social, political, or religious, must necessarily be organized and administered on the

same principles. Men can judge character only by external indications, and these external indications must be assumed to be presumptive evidence of the reality and genuineness of the character they indicate. And the individual officers of the society, whatever it may be, cannot be allowed to follow unrestrictedly the indications of their own variable judgments in each particular case. The society itself must, through its supreme authority, establish general rules and tests of presumptive evidence upon which its officers must act alike in the admission and in the exclusion of members.

1st. In the case of adults, or persons arrived at the condition of independent responsible agency, the presumptive ground of fitness for admission to the sealing ordinances of the Church is a competent knowledge of the plan of salvation, a credible profession of personal faith, and a walk and conversation consistent therewith. The amount of knowledge requisite must vary with the general intelligence of the subject. But it is evident that no person can be a Christian by profession who is absolutely ignorant of his own guilt and pollution and of Christ's meritorious work in our behalf. And, on the other hand, it is no less evident that multitudes of Christ's children are saved who have attained only to the vaguest and most elementary knowledge of the essentials of the gospel. A "credible profession" does not mean a profession of faith which compels credence, or which convinces the observer that it is genuine; but it is simply the opposite of the incredible—it is a confession that can be believed. Neither ministers of the gospel nor elders are able to read the secrets of the human heart, or to judge of character. Therefore, the great Head of the Church has not laid upon us the responsibility. The responsibility of professing Christ rests upon the individual professor. Every man who has the competent knowledge, and who makes a profession not incredible, and whose life is in conformity therewith, has a presumptive right to come to the sacraments. He does not need to prove his way in. If the session or pastor exclude him, they or he must show sufficient positive evidence of his not being a Christian to keep him out. This plain principle is one of great importance, the violation of which has brought great evil upon the Church. As the minister and church-session have no power of reading the heart of the applicant, so it must be a great evil if they officially form and express any judgment in the case. If they do pretend to listen to and judge of the value of the experience recited, they profanely assume to possess the prerogatives which belong to God alone, and they lead deluded souls to put an unwarrantable confidence in the worthless indorsement of the church authorities. It is by reason of this that so many are asleep in Zion. Each man ought to be thrown back upon his own unshared responsibility, and made "to examine himself, that so he may eat of this bread."

On the other hand, it is the great duty of those church-officers to whom Christ has committed the keys of the visible kingdom of heaven on earth to proclaim the truths of the gospel, to impress the resulting duties upon the consciences of men, and to set forth the high conditions of Christian communion which God exacts. The Romanists baptize all children indiscriminately. All adults who render an outward adherence to the Church are baptized. The State-Church systems of Protestant Europe recognize every reputable citizen of the State as a legitimate member of the Church. The true doctrine is, that no man, whatever his external relations may be, has a right to come to the holy sacraments unless he is duly qualified; and he cannot be duly qualified unless he is a

living member of Christ's mystical body, a temple of the Holy Ghost. Unless he possesses this character, his approach to the sacraments is in vain and a sin. But of this fact the man himself is always and only the one responsible judge. The officers and members of the church have no right to go behind his not incredible profession, on the presumptive evidence of which the Master requires all others to receive him and to treat him in all things as a Christian brother.

2nd. The children of all such persons as, on the ground of their own credible profession of faith, are received as members of the visible Church are to be baptized as members of the visible Church, because, presumptively, heirs of the blessings of the covenant of grace. The divinely appointed and guaranteed presumption is, if the parents, then, the children. This is not an invariable law binding God, but it is a prevailingly probable law, basing the authorized and rational recognition and treatment of such children by the Church as heirs of the promises. The reasons for our thinking so must be condensed into the fewest words:—

(1.) This presumption is rendered exceedingly probable by the fundamental constitution of humanity as a self-propagative race. A moral government pure and simple presupposes only individuals, and addresses itself to the control of individuals through their reasons, consciences, and wills. But the fact which differentiates the human subjects of the divine government from an ideal realm—as that of the angels, for instance—is that we are a race in which the nature, character, and status of the parent determine those of the child by a universal and inevitable hereditary law. Thus, the apostasy of Adam gave an entirely new direction to the history of his entire race, and thus the character and destiny of families, races, and nations have been always predetermined by the deeds and experiences of their ancestors. The law of heredity is the fundamental law of animal nature, including man; and since the God of nature is identical with the God of grace, it was to be anticipated that his remedial scheme of redemption should conserve and operate through all the laws of nature, while it antagonizes only that false nature which is sin. Hugh Miller, the Christian geologist, says: "Whatever we may think of the scriptural doctrine on this special head, it is a fact broad and palpable in the economy of nature that parents do occupy a federal position, and that the lapsed progenitors, when cut off from civilization and all external civilization of a missionary character, become the founders of a lapsed race. The iniquities of the parents are visited upon the children. In all such instances it is man left to the freedom of his own will that is the deteriorator of man. The doctrine of the Fall in its purely theologic aspect is a doctrine which must be apprehended by faith; but it is at least something to find that the analogies of science, instead of running counter to it, run in exactly the same line. It is one of the inevitable consequences of that nature of man which the Creator 'bound fast in fate' while he left free his will, that the free will of the parent should become the destiny of the child."

(2.) This presumption is borne out by the analogies of the entire history of God's providential revelations of the scheme of redemption recorded in Scripture. If the parents by an inevitable law bore their children away from God in their apostasy, it is surely to be expected that they shall bring back their children with them Godward in

their regeneration. The sin of the parents immediately involved the condemnation and guilt of the family. So when God began graciously to open to men a way of escape, and set up his kingdom in the world, the family was made the first form of the Church. In the entire patriarchal age every family the heads of which professed the true religion was a visible Church. The father was the prophet, priest, and king. By him the morning and evening sacrifices were offered. Wherever Abraham and the other patriarchs went they erected the altar and called upon the name of the Lord. The whole family, including especially the little children, constituted the Church, and were trained in the knowledge and service of God. In all his covenants God explicitly included the children with their parents. The faith of the parents turned the favour of God upon their children, and the promises of the parents bound their children under inalienable obligations. The curse denounced upon Adam and Eve has been in all its specifications inflicted on their seed throughout all generations. So when covenanting with Noah, the second father of the race, God said, "I will establish my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee in all their generations;" and when making his national covenant with the Israelites, Jehovah declared this principle: "For I, Jehovah thy God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments." And in the first great sermon of the New Dispensation, on the day of Pentecost, Peter, when preaching to the people that they must repent and be baptized, gives this remarkable reason for it: "For the promise [the gospel covenant] is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call."

(3.) Baptism under the New Dispensation of the covenant of grace in all respects takes the place of circumcision under the Old. It is "the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 11, 12). The one was a mark that was a sign of the necessity of regeneration and a pledge of its gift. In the other, water, the universal element of cosmical life, and the universal instrument of cleansing, is applied to the person with the same significance and design. Each in its own age was the authoritatively appointed door of entrance into the fold of salvation, and the badge of citizenship in the kingdom of God. Viewed as a mere outward rite, neither circumcision nor baptism, nor their absence, avails anything, but the new creature, which both alike signify. Baptism takes the place of circumcision, the seal of the covenant which God made with Abraham: "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. iii. 27, 29). Baptism represents the washing away of sin; circumcision did precisely the same. For God said, "I will circumcise thy heart and the heart of thy seed to love the Lord with all thy soul," etc. Circumcision, like baptism, represents an inward spiritual grace: "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God" (Rom. ii. 28, 29). Circumcision as well as baptism unites us to Christ. For Paul says (Col. ii. 10, 11): "In whom [that is, Christ, Head of all principality and power] ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ." Water-baptism is the precise equivalent of "the circumcision of

the flesh;” and the baptism of the Holy Ghost is the precise equivalent of “the circumcision of the heart.” The apostle Paul says everything of circumcision that an evangelical pastor would now say of baptism. The condition of the circumcision of an adult under the Mosaic law was precisely the same credible profession of faith which is now demanded as a precondition of adult baptism. But all the children of believers were circumcised; therefore there is every presumption that the children of believers should be baptized.

(4.) The Church under the Old Dispensation is precisely the same Church with the Christian Church under the New. They bore the same name: the “*Kahal Jehovah*” and the *evkkhsiva kurivou* (*ekklesia kuriou*) alike mean the Church of the Lord. Thus, Stephen called the “congregation of the Lord” before Sinai “the Church in the wilderness.” (Compare Acts vii. 38 with Ex. 32.) Their, foundation in the person and work of Christ was the same. The conditions of adult membership in each were the same profession of faith and promise of obedience. Every true Israelite was a true believer (Gal. iii. 7). All Israelites were at least credible professors of the true religion. The sacraments of this Church under its successive dispensations were of the same significance and binding force. Baptism is the “circumcision of Christ” (Col. ii. 11, 12). The Passover, like the Last Supper, represented the sacrifice of Christ (1 Cor. v. 7). The Christian converts from Judaism were not gathered into a new Church, but were daily added to the already existing Church. The Gentile branches did not constitute a new olive tree, but were grafted into the old Israelitish olive tree (Rom. xi. 17-24). The apostles, who entered the Church by circumcision, and who acknowledged Christ as the Messiah before the excision of the Jews in mass because of unbelief, were never baptized; while Paul and others, who belonged to the excised mass, were grafted back to their own olive tree through baptism.

But the infant children of all the members of the Church under the Old Testament were regarded and treated as members of the Church themselves, and their membership was sealed on the eighth day by circumcision.

(5.) Christ and his apostles, members of a Church which had always included infants, and themselves circumcised in infancy, in all respects spoke and acted as Paedobaptist ministers would in their place. Christ blessed little “children,” and declared of such is “the kingdom of heaven,” or the visible Church under the New Dispensation (Matt. xix. 14; xiii. 47). He commissioned Peter to feed his lambs (John xxi. 15-17), and all the apostles to “disciple all nations” by baptizing, then teaching them (Matt. xxviii. 19, 20).

The apostles were not settled pastors in an established Christian community, but itinerant missionaries in an unbelieving world, sent not to baptize, hut to preach the gospel (1 Cor. i. 17). Hence we have in Acts and the Epistles the record of only ten separate instances of baptism. In every case, without a single recorded exception where there was a family, the family was baptized as soon as the head of the family presented a credible profession of his faith (Acts xvi. 15, 32, 33 ; xviii. 8 ; 1 Cor. i. 16). And in their Epistles they always addressed children as members of the Church (Eph. v. 1; vi. 1-3 ; Col. iii. 20; 1 Cor. vii. 12-14).

In the most natural manner, without the slightest hint of change, and with every incidental indication possible of the uninterrupted continuance of the historical church-membership of infants, the narratives of the New Testament church-life grow from those of the Old. The preaching of the New Testament opens with the explicit declaration, abundantly significant as coming from an apostle to a representative national audience, all of whom knew of no Church which had not always embraced children in its sacramentally-sealed membership : “The promise” —that is, the gospel covenant, of which circumcision and baptism were successively the seals— “is unto you and to your children” (Acts ii. 39).

(6.) The universal consent of Christians in historical continuity with the apostles bears unbroken testimony to the immemorial right of the children of Christian professors to be recognized as members of the Church with their parents. It is noticed in the earliest records as a universal custom and as an apostolical tradition. Justin Martyr, writing A.D. 138, says that “there were among Christians of his time many persons of both sexes, some sixty and some seventy years old, who had been made disciples of Christ from their infancy.” Irenaeus, who died about A.D. 202, says: “He came to save all by himself—all, I say, who by him are born again unto God, infants, and little children, and youths.” The practice of infant baptism is acknowledged by Tertullian, born in Carthage A.D. 160. Origen, born of Christian parents in Egypt A.D. 185, says that it was “the usage of the Church to baptize infants,” and that “the Church had received the tradition from the apostles.” Cyprian, bishop of Carthage from A.D. 248 to A.D. 258, together with his entire synod, decided that baptism should be administered to infants before the eighth day. St. Augustine, born A.D. 358, declared that “this doctrine is held by the whole Church, not instituted by councils, but always retained.” This Pelagius himself was forced to admit, although he had visited all parts of the Church from Britain to Syria; and the point made by Augustine was fatal to the position which Pelagius occupied (*Wall’s History of Infant Baptism* and *Bingham’s Christian Antiquities*, bk. xi., ch. iv.).

The Church split into several fragments, Roman, Greek, Arminian, Nestorian, and Abyssinian, all differing in much, but all agreeing in support of the custom of recognizing and sealing infants as church-members.

At the time of the Reformation learned and holy men were raised up by God in the midst of every European nation. There were perfectly independent movements in each national centre of reform. Zwingli, the Reformer of the Swiss; Luther, the Reformer of the Germans; Calvin, the Reformer of the French, Cranmer, of the English Church, and Knox, of the Scotch, were all independent, and in some things diverse, yet they all agreed spontaneously in the recognition of the church-membership of the infant children of believers. And the great historic churches of the Reformation—the Anglican, the Lutheran, the Reformed or Presbyterian in all its varieties, the original branch of the Independents, the world-conquering Methodists—all unite with the older churches, Eastern and Western, in maintaining this grand historic constitution of infant church-membership. Those who protest against this ancient and ecumenical consensus, however eminently respectable as we affectionately recognize them to be, are certainly a recent growth, and thus far, as compared with the mighty host, but a small minority.

[III.] What is the Use of Infant Baptism?

We freely admit that our good Baptist brethren, who refuse to recognize and treat their children as members of the Church of Christ from birth, nevertheless enjoy with us the very benefits which infant baptism asserts and seals. The mistakes of God's true children will never make him unfaithful to them, nor defeat the blessings he intends for them. Precisely the same is true of the truly Christian Quakers. They enjoy all the blessings signified and sealed by the outward sacraments, although they neglect all of them entirely. Nevertheless, our Baptist brethren being judges, the obedient use of the sacraments is the more excellent way.

The use of "infant baptism" is precisely the use of any sacrament—that is, the incomparable benefit of externally signifying and sealing the benefits represented.

1st. In the baptism of every infant there are four parties present and concerned in the transaction—God, the Church, the parents, and the child. The first three are conscious and active, the fourth is for the time unconscious and passive.

2nd. In the act of baptism the use is found at the time in the benefit resulting from binding the parents and the Church to the performance of all their duties relating to the child, and from binding upon the child those special obligations and sealing to the child those special benefits which spring from the gospel covenant as it includes the children with the believing parent. The faith involved is that of the parent and of the Church, while the unconscious and passive beneficiary is the child himself.

3rd. Subsequently, when the child is taught and trained under the regimen of his baptism—taught from the first to recognize himself as a child of God, with all its privileges and duties; trained to think, feel, and act as a child of God, to exercise filial love, to render filial obedience—the benefit to the child directly is obvious and immeasurable. He has invaluable birthright privileges, and corresponding obligations and responsibilities.

4th. It is evident that this should be supplemented by a rite of confirmation. Of course I do not here refer to the unauthorized Romish and prelatial sacrament of the laying on of the hands of one of the changed successors of the apostles. I refer simply to the historical, universally-practised Christian ordinance observed in bringing the Christianly instructed and trained children before the Church "when they come to years of discretion: if they be free from scandal, appear sober and steady, and to have sufficient knowledge to discern the Lord's body, they ought to be informed it is their duty and their privilege to come to the Lord's Supper" (*Directory for Worship*, ch. x., § 1). Then they who have been members of the Church from their birth are admitted to full communion, and are confirmed in their church standing, upon their voluntarily taking upon themselves the vows originally imposed upon them by their parents in baptism. This is the CONFIRMATION, separated from the abortive mask of the so-called sacrament, that John Calvin declared was an ancient and beneficial custom, which he earnestly wished might be continued in the Church (*Institutes*, bk. iv., ch. xix. 12, 13), and which

Dr. Charles Hodge declared to be “retained in some form or other in all Protestant churches” (*Princeton Review*, 1855, p. 445). As far as we misunderstand or ignore this beautiful ordinance of confirmation we abandon to the mercies of our Baptist brethren the whole rational ground and reason of infant baptism.

[IV.] Mar Johanan, the Nestorian bishop, when solicited by high-churchmen to separate himself from non-prelatical Christians, exclaimed, “All who love the Lord Jesus Christ are my brethren.” Above all the narrow, meagre patriotism on earth is the large, free, ecumenical patriotism of those who embrace in their love and fealty the whole body of the baptized. All who are baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, recognizing the Trinity of Persons in the Godhead, the incarnation of the Son and his priestly sacrifice, whether they be Greeks, or Arminians, or Romanists, or Lutherans, or Calvinists, or the simple souls who do not know what to call themselves, are our brethren. Baptism is our common countersign. It is the common rallying standard at the head of our several columns. It is our common battle-flag, which we carry forward across the enemy’s line and nail aloft in the heights crowned with victory. We will be confined in our love and allegiance by no party lines. We follow and serve one common Lord. Hence there can be only “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” and hence only one indivisible, inalienable “sacramental host of God’s elect.”

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [Reformed Perspectives Magazine Forum](#).

Subscribe to Reformed Perspectives Magazine

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [Reformed Perspectives Magazine](#), please select this [link](#).