

GOD MOVES US THROUGH BAPTISM TO BELIEVE!

B. Holwerda¹

Scripture: 1 Peter 3:15-22

Songs: Psalm 71:4, 12

Psalm 71:2

Psalm 105:2, 3, 5

Psalm 111:3, 5

LORD'S DAY 27:

72. Q. Is, then, the outward washing with water itself the washing away of sin?
A. No, for only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins.
73. Q. Why, then, does the Holy Spirit call baptism *the washing of regeneration* and *the washing away of sins*?
A. God speaks thus not without great cause: to wit, not only to teach us thereby that as the filthiness of the body is taken away by water, so our sins are removed by the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ; but especially to assure us by this divine pledge and sign that we are spiritually cleansed from our sins as really as we are outwardly washed with water.
74. Q. Are infants also to be baptized?
A. Yes; for since they, as well as adults, are included in the covenant and Church of God, and 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, they must also by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be ingrafted into the Christian Church, and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers, as was done in the old covenant or testament by circumcision, instead of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.

Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ,

Is it really possible and permissible for me to believe? That is a question which continuously bothers many, perhaps even a majority, in the church. Every Sunday in the church the preaching has to do with faith, and yet the personal assurance of faith is for many extremely sporadic. And if we look into the history of the church we discover that this has been so for many centuries. There is much more doubt, much more unbelief in the church than childlike trust in the Lord based upon His Word.

People have tried both formerly and recently to do something about this disease which rages like an epidemic in the church. Some have written large books about the characteristics of grace

¹ The late Prof. B. Holwerda of the Reformed Seminary (Art. 31) in Kampen, The Netherlands, authored this sermon which appears in his four-volume work, *De dingen die ons van God geschonken zijn* ("The Things Given Us By God"), published by Oosterbaan & LeCointre, Goes, 1955. It is a "catechism sermon" which intends to explain Lord's Day 27 of the Heidelberg Catechism (the text of which follows below). Since the entire subject of baptism is now on the docket in the Christian Reformed Church by virtue of a newly-proposed liturgical form for the sacrament, we begin a thorough treatment of the matter with a translation of this sermon. The translation is by Rev. John H. Piersma, pastor of Bethany Christian Reformed Church, South Holland, Ill. [This translation was originally published in *Torch and Trumpet* 20.9 (Sept. 1970), pp. 17-21. I have made a few slight adjustments to it. — JB]

by which a Christian may get to know himself. Some have given careful attention to every soul tremor in the life of the godly, describing in minute detail that which ought to be experienced within the spiritual life of the Christian. And some have urged people to examine themselves whether they knew such experience, meaning honestly to lead them thereby to faith. But with all of this we have come further than ever from home; many who were hunched over the "old writers" day after day in careful study came no farther than an earnest sigh. That which they knew least of all was assurance.

From all of this we must learn that the matter of faith is to be taken very carefully. There is nothing more tender than faith. Whoever tries to find faith in any other way than that which God has prescribed undermines faith. God alone can open up the way to faith, and He provides the means by which we come to faith, and by which we are established therein. And he who departs but a single step from this way, who recommends another means of faith than that given by God, he ruins both himself and others. He is on the way which leads to personal shipwreck. For God alone gives the means of faith! And these means are effective only through God! If man could bring himself to faith then we might try our own domestic remedies, our own pet ways. But just because faith is not of us, but a gift from God, we shall honor and praise God only in the way of his means of grace. I call you back, therefore, from your own ways to the way of the Lord, and back from substitute means to the genuine, effective means of grace which he has given us in baptism. I speak to you therefore of GOD, THE GOD WHO THROUGH BAPTISM MOVES US TO FAITH. To such faith he moves us through the Word which he speaks:

- I. *at* baptism;
- II. *about* baptism;
- III. And *in* baptism.

1. We wish first of all to take note of the Word which the Lord speaks *at* baptism. That is the Word which you hear at every administration of baptism, mentioned also in the preceding Lord's Day: I baptize you into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Here, too, as oftener, the most familiar texts are least understood; these expressions are so worn down that their deeper glory is little appreciated by many, and rarely does one ask as to what these words mean.

Just for that reason we wish to begin now with the question, What does it mean to baptize someone into the Name of God?

Now it wouldn't surprise me if most of us thought that this means that we baptize in obedience to God's command. If I do something in someone's name, or if I approach someone in someone's name, then I am saying thereby that I am not coming in my own behalf or upon my own impulse, but that I am coming because I have been sent by someone else. I am carrying out this affair not upon my own authority but by virtue of a commission received from someone else.

But this is not the way to understand the baptismal formula: I baptize you into the Name of God. It is true, of course, that the minister carries out the administration of baptism as authorized by God. And yet the words "in the Name of" refer to something else.

If you know your Bible you will remember that it says of the Israelites that they "were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (I Cor. 10:2). That means that the cloudy pillar established a relationship, a bond between Moses and the Israelites. It was not just a gathering of loose individuals which appeared before the cloud. No, that cloud bound them to each other; that cloud united them around Moses. Isn't it true, however, that in the wilderness God spoke only to Moses? Yes, God spoke only to him, and God dealt only with him. But all of those words and dealings were for all of the Israelites. By means of the cloud they had been linked up with Moses. It was "the Moses-congregation" which trekked onward, and because the cloud was a sign that they all belonged to Moses, therefore all of God's words and deeds were applicable to and valid for the entire "Moses-congregation."

It was also that way when Israel passed through the Red Sea. On that occasion God did not let Moses go unscathed through the water by himself. God did not spare his life only from the threat of the attacking Egyptians. No, the sea encircled them all. They went through the Sea as a *congregation*, of which every one was a member with Moses. They were united about Moses. They were a unity in him.

To baptize someone into someone else intends to say, therefore, that a bond of fellowship exists between them, so that the one belongs to the other, so that the one stands under the authority and protection of the other. The baptism of I Cor. 10:2 lays a bond of fellowship with Moses, and by this union everything that Moses says and does accrues to all of the people "baptized into Moses."

You may reply, of course, by saying: But it does not say that we are "baptized into God." Indeed, we speak here of being baptized "into the *Name* of God." But what meaning does *name* have in the Bible? This is now little understood by us. Our names are more often than not mere words, meaningless sounds, little more than numbers by which one person is distinguished from another. Maybe we are named after a grandfather or an auntie, but the real meaning of that name is long lost. And even if we do know the meaning of our name, it remains a question whether it really fits us, if that name really indicates that which is unique in my character or person.

For the Oriental *name* is greater and richer in meaning. For him a name means to indicate what someone really is. It is a true expression of that which is characteristic and typical of a certain person. And that precisely not in terms of the man *by himself*, in the deeper recesses of his existence, in the isolation of his inner life. The name is that with which one appears in public. In one's name lies fixed the nature of one's contact with the outside world. The name never indicates therefore what one is for himself, *but what one is for others*.

We must firmly remember this when we are baptized into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Because we are inclined when speaking of the Trinity, when we name the names of the Father, Son and Spirit to think quickly that this has to do with God as he exists in and by himself, and not of him as he reveals himself to men. We very easily conclude that the names Father, Son and Spirit say what these Persons are for each other. But we must bear in mind that these are *names*. This is what they are for others. In the Baptism Formula they are not indicative of what the Three Persons are for each other in their mutual life and relationship, but they reveal these Persons as the God who fellowships with us. "Father" does not mean that he is Father of the eternal Son, but that he is our Father. And likewise "Son" does not refer here to the fact that he is the only begotten of the Father, but that he as the only begotten Son declares the Father to us. And again: "Holy Spirit" does not refer to the Spirit in his divine activity with the Father and the Son, but it refers to him as the Spirit of sanctification who has been given to us.

And now you will understand what it means to be baptized into the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is that God himself establishes a bond of fellowship between us and those three, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He declares that he gives us to share in him and in everything which he would be for men. He reveals that I am his possession. The possession of the Father, who "adopts us for His children and heirs, and therefore will provide us with every good thing and avert all evil or turn it to our profit."² The possession of the Son, so that "He washes us in His blood from all our sins, incorporating us into the fellowship of His death and resurrection, so that we are freed from our sins and accounted righteous before God." The possession of the Holy Spirit, who "will dwell in us, and sanctify us to be members of Christ, imparting to us that which we have in Christ, namely, the washing away of our sins and the daily renewing of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without spot among the assembly of the elect in life eternal."

So I stand in covenant fellowship with God being baptized into his Name, being united with him in everything which he according to his sovereign good pleasure wills to be for men.

Now I return to the question: May I believe?

And I now answer: *I must believe*. I may do anything except not believe. God is surely not toying with us when we are being baptized. If he says that I belong to him, that I am the possession of Father, Son and Spirit and therefore a beneficiary of all their saving work, where then do I find warrant to contradict that Word, and arbitrarily place a question mark behind his

² [These quotations are from the historic Reformed Baptismal Form found in the Christian Reformed Church's *Psalter Hymnal* as "Form # 1." At the time this sermon was translated, some were charging that this form was "too didactic" and suggesting a replacement for it, which the publishers of *Torch and Trumpet* believed "would represent a serious loss for the church."— JB.]

Word?

May I believe? Surely that may no longer be a question for us. Fact is, the answer to that question may never depend upon what I think of myself. For I always think too favorably of myself, and in every judgment which I make of myself I reveal that I am depraved, that I am totally dishonest with respect to self. No, the answer is dependent upon God's sovereign determination with respect to my life. He declares that I am of him. He declares that in the Word which he spoke to me at baptism. And now it is so. Not perhaps, but for sure. God determines to whom I belong. He does that sovereignly, according to his own good pleasure.

How did it go when you were born? You did not choose your father and mother; nor they their baby. But God determined in his own good pleasure that you should be the child of your parents. God established that bond. And precisely so did God according to his good pleasure establish the bond between himself and you. He simply seized hold of you. He did not wait until the moment in which you came to believe. He did not make it dependent upon your choice. But he swore by himself: As truly as I live, saith the Lord, this man stands in fellowship with the Father and the Son and the Spirit.

And now we had better make up our minds: Maybe we prefer to know nothing of this bond of fellowship. Or maybe we doubt its truthfulness. But that bond is there as attested by the infallible testimony of God. We will never get free from it. Nor is there any other way along which we may come to faith. If you refuse to trust God in his Word you will not find faith elsewhere. You may study all the older and newer writers, examine yourself, list faith's characteristics, listen to the experiences of pious people, but it will avail you nothing. For God is our Judge and he alone decides. If you will not bow before the God who swears oaths, who announces his declarations publicly, then you will never get there.

I would never say one bad thing of either older or newer writers, nor even less of the so-called "marks of faith." But if you allow yourselves thereby to be prevented from believing in God upon the basis of his Word then you are most unfortunate. What can it really matter to me in the last analysis what certain pious people formerly or now say? I have to do with God. And all those heavy tomes can be left standing upon the shelf if you only believe this one thing which God himself has spoken to you: I baptize you into the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Another gospel does not exist.

If God cannot move you to faith by this means, who or what in the world can bring you to that point? Experience and marks of faith and ancient writers and spiritually far-advanced souls — all these are very good. But if they come in the place of the one true God who reveals himself to me in his Word spoken at baptism, then it is all to be condemned. Even if it were to come from an angel out of heaven, it would be accursed. All of these have nothing to add to this one little sentence which God himself speaks at our baptism.

Am I opposed to experience? Do I reject the marks of faith? Of course not! But this God hates, that people make of experience a means of grace, and of the marks of faith a sacrament. This God hates, that certain people believe the esteemed, old writers, and do not believe him, the one only God. Oh, those grave and sober souls who bury this Word of God under their heavy volumes; who with their doctrine of the marks of faith ruin God's sacraments; who hinder faith right there where God moves to faith! Let us tremble before God!

2. Still more: God does not only speak *at* baptism, but he also speaks *about* baptism. And also in that speech he would move us unto faith.

He calls baptism *the washing of regeneration and the washing away of sins*. The Roman Catholics have deduced therefrom that the water of baptism itself possesses forgiving and renewing power. Rome makes the water of baptism a magical means by which the grace of God is brought to us. The Catechism understood very well that this was not the divine intention. Only the blood of Jesus Christ, once shed on the Cross, cleanses us from all sins.

The outward washing with water is not itself the washing away of sin. And yet that is what it is called. God calls it that nevertheless, no matter how much it is not really so.

The Catechism asks itself therefore: Why does God talk that way, why does he speak to inaccurately? Doesn't God choose his words carefully? Is he a man to speak in a slovenly manner? Does he just say something without knowing what he is saying? If God calls baptism the washing away of sins, even though it isn't that, doesn't God create misunderstanding?

Remember, God wills to bring us to faith. That goes ahead of all else for him. If only he can get us that far, he will do everything he can. He uses therefore stylistic forms which are not literally precise. Does God strive to be as accurate in his expression as, say, an attorney? No, he desires that we should believe. The larger effect of his words is his principal concern. And so he speaks like a man who, in order to give greater effectiveness to his words, underlines by deliberate use of inaccuracy, underscores by way of exaggeration.

Isn't that also what we do? If someone has a hundred dollars coming from me I can give him a hundred dollar bill. But I can also write him a check for that amount. And then I can say: There you have your hundred dollars. Am I expressing myself accurately? No, for such a check is not itself a means of payment. And yet no one complains, because that check proves that this person is empowered to get from my bank the specified amount. As certainly as he has that paper, so certainly will he receive his money. We do not speak literally and accurately in such instances, but we do speak the truth, and we speak it in such a way that doubt is no longer a real possibility.

God does that too. He baptizes us, and says: here you have the regeneration, the new birth; here you have the washing away of sins. Might that arouse misunderstanding? Oh yes, God knew well enough that the Romanists would misuse this word. But God accepts that risk because he would at all costs convince us. Men must know that they are washed from their sins as certainly as the outward washing with water takes away the filthiness of the body. Baptism is the legal evidence that we have a right to forgiveness and to sanctification just as much as my check guarantees payment of debt. All right, says God, let it happen that this or that person misunderstands that text, if only they firmly and surely believe that they have received forgiveness and regeneration. Misunderstanding with respect to a text is not that serious; but unbelief and doubt, that is bad. If only they believe! God uses the means of inaccurate expression in order to compel us to believe. If only we believe....

Indeed, the Roman Catholics are wrong: the water itself does not provide forgiveness. But they have understood at least that he who is baptized possesses most assuredly the washing away of sins.

Who is closer to the Kingdom of God? The Romanist with a wrong doctrine of the sacrament, but a firm belief in forgiveness, or the Reformed Christian who has a sound conception of the sacrament but no faith? A misunderstanding, a mistake, ah, no, that isn't so bad. The preaching will correct that, and the catechism class. *But unbelief, that is bad!* If God extends himself to the limit, if he appropriates every means that we might believe, why then do we not believe? What more can God do? God speaks a wonderfully comforting word upon the occasion of baptism; God also gives a powerful witness about baptism. Let it be open to misunderstanding, but for doubt and unbelief there is no room.

Earlier we read together from Peter's epistle. When the storms of persecution raged against the church and the congregation sees God's judgment strike in the world Peter says: baptism saves you from that divine judgment (I Peter 3:21). Again, that is not an accurate statement. But what is the difference? If men only believe. If only they cling to their baptism, even in these unspeakable times, if only they now know with unshakeable certainty: I will be preserved from the wrath of God, then they will know the real thing. And then the rest, be it a misunderstanding or a mistake, will come out all right.

The Roman Catholics have identified the external washing and the washing away of sins. Of course they should not have done that. But many Reformed people are busy cutting the tie between baptism and forgiveness. And what they retain is a mere concept of baptism, a little piece of theology. But the Son of Man, when he comes, will he find faith on the earth? We have just witnessed a six-year period of haggling about the "essence and appearance" of the covenant or whatever you call it; this has become a doctrinal difference among us. Shouldn't we now at last begin to talk once again about faith?

It is so far in our churches that sometimes people call such ministers "extremists" who maintain that the Catechism is right when it says that "we are spiritually cleansed from our sins as really as we are outwardly washed with water."³ Extremists, dangerous for the churches, men of

³ This is a reference to the doctrinal controversies which took place in the Reformed Churches of The Netherlands in the thirties and forties, and which led to the split identified often with Prof. K. Schilder.

whom you ought to be afraid. But is that really extremism? Well, let it be so, for God would bring us to believe. And it is only after we believe that theology gets its turn.

3. Now the last point: God wishes to lead us to faith through the Word which he speaks *in* baptism. After all, you know that the sacraments are the *visible* Word. They do nothing else but to point us to the promise of the Gospel. And so we must see that also in baptism itself, in the very administration of this sacrament, God speaks to us.

That becomes very plain for us in the Catechism's answer to the question, Are infants also to be baptized? You know what kind of objections some hold on this point. After all, they say, such a child cannot believe. How can it then receive the seal of the righteousness of faith? To this problem some offered this solution: children cannot know the act of faith, but they can have the potential or capacity to believe. But this solution did not prove very satisfactory. For upon maturity it appeared that not all children believed. When a baby is presented for baptism one can actually say nothing as to what will develop in that child. And as long as you cannot know that, how can you baptize?

What is now so choice in the Catechism at this point? That it never once enters upon these objections, because that would contribute nothing to the situation. You do not have to fantasize about some capacity of faith, nor speculate what might grow out of this or that child. Those are things with which we have nothing to do. That was also the error of those who sought to baptize upon the basis of a presupposed regeneration. I then build baptism upon a very shaky foundation: upon a presupposition which can later turn out to be a complete mistake. I have nothing to do in baptism with the faith of the child, about which I presume something. I have to do with God's promise, about which I have complete certainty. Indeed, if baptism was a seal upon our faith I would not know what to do with it. It is rather a seal upon God's promise.

And therefore infants also can be baptized upon the basis of God's express promises to them. Baptism does not say that they are believing children or that they are regenerated. But baptism does say "that they, as well as the adults, are included in the covenant and Church of God," and that "both redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, the Author of faith, are through the blood of Christ promised to them." That is right! Baptism does not say who the children will be in the future for God, but it does say who God both now and in the future is for them. We are not certain about the child, but we are completely certain about God.

Our Form for Baptism is so beautiful on this matter. "Although our children do not understand these things, we may not therefore exclude them from baptism, since they are without their knowledge partakers of the condemnation in Adam, and so again are received unto grace in Christ, as God speaks...."

As God speaks.... This means to say that acceptance in grace goes along the same route as our being comprehended in Adam. Why do our children share in the condemnation in Adam? Surely they know nothing about this. No more than they know redemption in Christ.

Do they have a part in the condemnation of Adam because they have the potential or capacity to know? No one puzzles about this. They have a share in Adam's fall without their knowledge or apprehension by virtue of the righteous imputation of God. God declares that it is so, and that is all there is to it.

But exactly in the same way do they share in Christ. Not because they believe, or because they have the capacity or inclination or potential of faith, or because they own a presumed regeneration. No, only because of God's righteous and gracious imputation, by which they are ingrafted into Christ, even as he has comprehended them from the first in Adam. God pronounces it, and that is the end of it. It is so not because the children believe it or because they have the potential ability to believe it, but because God says it. We are thus sure of but one thing: God's promise. And of it baptism is a seal, confirming that God means what he says; that he

cannot lie, that we can herein really trust him.

You must hold fast to this, beloved. Baptism is a seal upon God's promise, not upon our faith. Many often think the latter: that baptism is a seal upon our faith. And because they know that not all children come to believe they do not dare to rely upon their baptism until they believe. If they believe, yes, then they dare to say that their baptism was a genuine baptism. But in this way they lose baptism altogether. For then I must see to it that I come to faith outside of baptism. And if I can get to believe outside of baptism, what do I need baptism for at all? It is then good for nothing. *If I believe* I do not need to know anything more as to whether my baptism was genuine. For such a believer baptism is completely superfluous. And if he should fall into doubt once again, then he gains nothing from his baptism. For if he doubts with respect to his faith, he will automatically doubt as to the genuineness of his baptism. In this fashion baptism disappears altogether.

But now baptism is the seal upon God's promise. He says it in his Word, and he assures me personally in the sacrament that I am his child. He would deliver me from all doubt. He wills to bring me through baptism unto faith, to a resting upon his promise. Not the other way around: that is, through faith to bring me to an appreciation of my baptism as genuine.

Baptism is always genuine.

It is always a seal. Not only for believers, just as well for unbelievers. If I must first investigate to determine if my baptism is indeed genuine, where am I? If I possess something that bears a seal, do I then proceed to see if it is genuine? If I do then the seal loses all value! A seal serves to confirm genuineness, and if the seal is possibly ingenuine, I have no benefit from that seal any more.

And this is the view of baptism held by many. One's baptism is perhaps something else than a genuine baptism. That is to say, the seal of the covenant is perhaps no seal at all. But if I cannot trust God's seals, upon what can I trust? Does God perhaps deceive us? Does he play with us? Is he a man, who can lie?

Beloved, God is true. And therefore his seals are genuine. Your baptism is a real baptism. If that were not true, then God is not really God! But God is faithful and trustworthy, and therefore his sacraments are that too. Therefore I can trust in him. And I can believe his Word as spoken to me in the sacrament.

Do you now see that God wills to move you to faith, every one of you personally? The word *at* baptism, the word *about* baptism, and the word *in* baptism — all of these are spoken in order that you might believe.

May I believe? Come now! I believe, Lord, because you have come in every possible way to help me in my unbelief. *Amen.*