

## Chapter 11

### Sign, Sacrament, or Baptismal Regeneration?

And he received the sign of circumcision ,  
a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith  
while he was still uncircumcised.  
-Romans 4:11-

#### "Theological" or "Sacramental" Correlation?

The preceding chapters will undoubtedly suggest, to some, *baptismal regeneration*. To be sure, more than mere *theological correlation* is involved in acknowledging the bond of theological linkage between Jesus' high-priestly blessing of infants, the Shekinah glory in the temple, triune baptism, and the New Testament gift of the Holy Spirit. To postulate such a theological unity between the Davidic covenant, Christ's virgin birth and incarnation, the Kingdom of God, the unusual regeneration of John the Baptizer, and Jesus's words in John 3:5 and then to insist on infant baptism on that basis constitutes more than an exercise in theological correlation.

*Theological correlation* simply implies that baptism is a *sign*. The New Testament, however, connects the regenerative work of the Spirit to water baptism in such a way that the two distinct works frequently appear as one (Acts 22:16; Eph. 5:26; Titus 3:5-6; 1 Pet. 3:21). Normally the gift of the Holy Spirit was bestowed within the context of water baptism (Acts 2:38; 8:15-17; 19:5-6), or, conversely, water baptism was administered in connection with the gift of the Spirit (Acts 10:44-48).

Beasley-Murray noted the complexity involved in tracing the relationship between the administration of baptism and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. He concluded *first* that baptism was "closely linked with the reception of the Spirit, howsoever it may be received," and *second* that allowance

had to be made in that God exercised a great deal of freedom in bestowing the Spirit (1963, 301).

Baptism is certainly more than a bare sign. As William Ames put it, "A bare sign only represents something. A seal not only represents but presents something by sealing" ([1629] 1983, 197). This is more than mere *theological* correlation--it is *sacramental* correlation. Baptism indeed is a *sacrament* and not merely a *sign*. "A sign sealing the covenant of God is called a sacrament, Rom. 4.11." "They seal the whole covenant to believers" (Ames [1629] 1983, 197, 198).

The *Westminster Confession* later embraced the same truths that William Ames had affirmed,

. . . there is in every sacrament a spiritual relationship, or sacramental union between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other (WCF 1946, XXVII, xiii).

Ames had clearly identified "the spiritual thing": "The new covenant itself, or Christ himself with all the blessings which are prepared in him for the faithful" ([1629] 1983, 198). He had also defined the nature of the "union" and acknowledged the efficacy of baptism:

The union between the sign and what is signified by it is "neither real nor imaginary; it is rather a spiritual relation by which the things signified are really communicated to those who rightly use the signs" (Ames [1629] 1983, 197).

The *Westminster Confession* affirmed,

By the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto (1946, XXVIII, vi.).

The *Confession* made it clear, however, (1) that "the efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered," but that the moment of its efficacious application to the recipient's heart was "according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time"; and (2) that "grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed" to baptism, "as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it; or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated" (1946, XXVIII, v, vi.). For that reason, the term *baptismal regeneration*, at least in the *ex opere operato* sense, would not fit in this case.

The Roman Catholic Church holds to an "objective" view of the New Testament sacraments which it designates by the term *ex opere operato* [lit. from the work done]. According to this view, the sacrament is valid and efficacious by virtue of the very action of its administration considered independently of the merits of either the minister or the recipient. By contrast, Rome designates the sacramental principle of the Old Testament by the term *ex opere operantis* [lit. from the work of the worker]; that is, the efficacy of the sacrament hinged on the performance of the conditions required for its valid administration. The Old Testament sacrament was legal, merely prefiguring the grace of Christ, and could only bring the recipients into Limbo until Christ led them out. Rome views the New Testament sacraments as savingly efficacious and postulates seven of them. Besides baptism and the Lord's Supper (the Eucharist), Rome has included confirmation, penance, orders, matrimony, and extreme unction (Berkov 1932, 2:228-231; Webster 1981).

Not all offspring of professing Christians are automatically regenerated on the promise of Genesis 17:7--they are not all elect--despite the implication of some of Calvin's comments (1960, 2:1321). Furthermore, those offspring who are regenerated are not necessarily regenerated in infancy, and those who are regenerated in infancy are not necessarily regenerated at the point of baptism. God alone determines the timing. Even where regeneration does coincide with the administration of baptism, the water is not the *cause*, in any sense; rather the atoning death of Christ is the efficient cause, the preaching of the

Word is the means, and the Holy Spirit is the Agent. The same is the case, of course, where there is no coincidence in time and space between the reception of the covenant sign and the spiritual reality which it represents.

However the term *baptismal regeneration* may apply in a *sacramentally correlative* sense, it cannot be said to apply in a *causal* sense; and it may be questioned whether the term "baptismal regeneration" ever applies in a strictly *temporal* or *spatial* sense, on the basis of Luke's historical record of the first century church (Acts 8:14-17; 10:44-48; 19:5-6). It is quite apparent from these texts that the Spirit is not bound to the specific moment of the human application of water, nor to the water itself, in his work of regeneration. To affirm baptismal regeneration in the *sacramentally correlative* sense is simply to acknowledge that baptism is a sign and seal; to affirm it in the *causal* sense is to border on superstition, and even idolatry. Ames wrote, "Sacraments do not properly exist apart from their being used, i.e. they are not revered sacraments either before or after their use" [1629] 1983, 197). And one can hardly quarrel with Beasley-Murray's observation that some views of the sacraments effectively reduce baptism to the level of magic (1963, 264-5).

While Scripture establishes the sacramental connection between the impartation of the Spirit and the application of water baptism, the Sovereign Lord determines the temporal-spatial sequence of events in God's economy. As Beasley-Murray noted,

... one point is made abundantly clear by the evidence of Acts, namely that life is more complicated than formulations of doctrine and the Lord is able to look after the exigencies of life outside the range of the formulas (1963, 302).

In the case of David's son, the covenant sign was not even administered, as his child died on the seventh day of infancy and circumcision by divine command was to be administered on the

eighth day. Yet David demonstrated assurance that God had graciously received his departed child (2 Sam. 12:18-23).

What is *conferred* in the sacrament of infant baptism is not salvation itself, unless the sacrament be defined in such a way as to "lock in" the regeneration of the Spirit. In that case, there must certainly be countless administrations of infant baptism, as well as adult baptisms, that would not qualify as being sacramental. Calvin taught that no sacrament existed without "some antecedent promise of God." "Sacramental promises are 'covenants' and the sacraments are 'seals of covenants'" (Naglee 1987, 66). Of course, in the case of those elect offspring and in the strict sense of infant baptism being a covenant transaction, the term *baptismal regeneration* would have some validity. But that is a far different thing than to say that no sacrament exists without salvation.

If one argues that whenever the sacrament of baptism takes place there is the coincident baptism of the Spirit, and that no baptism takes place unless there is the coincident baptism of the Holy Spirit, he is assuming the very point in dispute (Berkov 1932, 2:226). In that case, further discussion would be pointless--baptismal regeneration, in the *ex opere operato*, would be undeniable. The problem with defining the sacrament in that way, however--whether by the Baptists in order to dismiss the term, or the Roman Catholic Church in order to safeguard the Church's institutional authority (John 20:23)--is that the Sovereign God never intended water baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit to be so closely identified that water baptism could be regarded as the *cause* of regeneration, or that its administration would categorically guarantee regeneration.

It would be totally contrary to God's plan to make the administration of water baptism the *cause* of salvation, for "no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law" (Rom. 3:20; 4:11, 14). Otherwise, the apostle Paul could hardly have written "I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius" or "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 1:14, 17). Neither would Peter have waited until he observed evidence of the regenerative work

of the Spirit (much less, have taken the time to proclaim the Gospel) before ordering the administration of water baptism for Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:34-48).

### **"Instrumental Cause?"**

The Roman Catholic Church defined baptism at the Council of Trent as the "*causa instrumentalis*" of justification (Wood 1910, 2:400). While this had been the view of medieval scholastic Thomas Aquinas, it no doubt played off Peter's words in 1 Peter 3:21-22, and especially his reference to "baptism that now saves you." It did so, however, without sufficient ground. For Peter, the power associated with baptism was not in the water *per se*--if his words are taken in their context:

This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand--with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him (1 Pet. 3:21-22).

Obviously, it is the baptism of the Holy Spirit that is in view here and that does the saving, for the gift of the Holy Spirit represents the power of Christ's resurrection of which Peter speaks (cf. Rom. 8:11)--though the water be sacramentally correlative to both (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12).

To define baptism as *instrumental cause* presents great potential for misleading people to trust in the outward form of religion while denying the power of it. The saving efficacy associated with baptism resides in Christ who is made known in the preaching of the Gospel (Gal. 3:10), to which baptism is a mere "appendix" (Calvin 1960, 2:1328). Indeed Paul regarded the resurrection as the *cause* of justification: "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Rom. 4:25). But this is no argument that water

baptism, whenever administered, invariably brings with it the bestowal of salvation. Peter himself certainly recognized this when he spoke to Simon the sorcerer who had been previously baptized:

You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin (Acts 8:21-23).

Consequently, baptism is better defined as a "sign and seal" of salvation than as the *instrumental cause* of it. This was Paul's point when he wrote to the church at Rome and defined the "sign of circumcision," the Old Testament counterpart of baptism, as "a seal of the righteousness" that Abraham "had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (Rom. 4:11; Col. 2:11-12).

To define a sacrament as a *sign* and *seal* is not to equate it with the bestowal of salvation; rather it is to regard it as an exhibition to the physical senses, and a spiritual testimony to the heart, concerning the thing that is promised--and "a mutual attestation of our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of angels and before men" (Calvin 1960, 2:1277). Only the Spirit of God himself working through the Word, of which the sacrament is but an appendage, can actually bestow the gift of eternal life.

No human priesthood may arrogate to itself the regenerative power which resides in the Lord of the church--it is sovereignly bestowed by him (Acts 10:25-26; 8:18-24 1 Cor. 1:12-16). The leadership of the church must always stand ready to make the same apostolic disclaimer that Peter made (Acts 3:12-16; 10:25-26).

The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon

the piety or intention of him that doth administer it: but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of the institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers (WCF 1946 XXVII, iii).

To presume otherwise is to fall into the same trap that ensnared the people of Judah who superstitiously trusted in the temple institution itself instead of the LORD. Consequently, the temple itself came under God's judgment (2 Chron. 7:21; Ezek. 24:21).

Reformed scholar Hoeksema took Abraham Kuyper to task for positing a concept of baptismal grace in addition to regeneration.

Along that path we run the risk of again exalting the institute of the church on earth in Romish fashion, even as many do in our day, and of making that institute the dispenser of the grace of Christ, thus shoving that institute between Christ and His church (1977, 42).

John Wesley, following the position articulated by his father, regarded baptism as "the ordinary instrument of our justification." He avoided Zwingli's sharp distinction between the sign and the thing signified, so as not to regard baptism as a bare sign and regeneration as an independent operation of God, totally isolated from the sign (Naglee 1987, 112, 114). Wesley even went so far as to affirm the *ex opere operato* union of *signum* and *res* [i.e., outward sign and the thing signified] in his evangelical sermon entitled "*The New Birth*"--a view he attributed to the Church of England (Naglee 1987, 109).

The Church of England actually taken a more moderate position in the *Articles of 1552*, endorsed by Continental Reformers Peter Martyr and Martin Bucer. The Church repudiated both the view that baptism was a mere empty sign, and the view that baptism conferred grace *ex opere operato* [from the mere performance of the act] (Goode 1857, 26-27).

David Naglee should not have been surprised at the resistance to Wesley's views when he observed,

For some strange reason, baptismal regeneration in Wesley's theology is repugnant to some of his interpreters. Nevertheless, the existence of this tenet in his theology is undeniable. Ironically, Wesley's evangelical sermons affirm his conviction that regeneration can and does come through infant baptism (Naglee 1987, 117).

Naglee noted that even in the Roman Catholic Church *ex opere operato* reception is not realized "apart from adults possessing true faith and repentance" (1987, 62). "For an adult to come to the Sacrament without believing would be of no avail for salvation" (De Ferrari 1967, 2:67). If this is true, the Roman Church, apparently, finds some common ground with the Westminster Assembly, namely that "Grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed" to baptism "that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated" (WCF 1946, XXVIII, v).

Reformer Martin Bucer certainly rejected any unqualified *ex opere operato* view of the sacraments.

We ourselves have never denied, that the words and Sacraments of the Gospel are Christ's organs, by which he gives us the benefit of his redemption. This only we deny. . . that Sacraments and sacred words are *such instruments and channels of grace that they bring salvation with whatever mind or faith you partake of them*. For some have so tied the grace of Christ to them, that these external things seem of themselves to work salvation, even though the mind never seriously raises itself to Christ, so that the superstition of the common people, who are yet ignorant of true faith in Christ, rests in these things (Goode 1857, 179).

For Calvin, and later the framers of the *Westminster Confession*, "faith", rather than baptism, was regarded as the *instrument* of justification (Brand 1991, 106-7; WCF 1946, XI,

ii). John Cotton, in his treatise on the *Covenant of Grace*, expressed his preference for the word *instrument* as opposed to *instrumental cause* (Brand 1991, 105). Louis Berkov called faith the *instrumental condition* of justification (1932, 2:228).

In the early part of his ministry, Luther held that the grace of God was conferred not certainly by the water, but by the word of God, which is with and beside the water, and by the faith which trusts in such word of God in the water (Wood 1910, 2:401).

Later he put more stress on the "objectivity" of the sacrament. By emphasizing the outward element of the water, he had hoped to avoid the error of "the enthusiasts who made all turn on inner feeling." The Protestant Reformers, as a rule, however, denied that the sacraments conferred grace *ex opere operato* (Wood 1910, 2:401, Note).

To be sure, there are no magical powers inherent in the water *per se*, however men may designate it holy. Holy baptism--rendered efficacious by the cross of Christ--does not require a theory of a human hierarchy or the ubiquity of Christ's body for its efficacy. If as Augustine stated (and Calvin and Luther concurred), baptism is a sacrament (and not a mere symbolic ordinance)--"a visible form of an invisible grace," its sacredness is derived from the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Calvin 1960, 2:1277). Its efficacy, consists in its close association with the Word, its authorization by the Word, and its visible, tangible portrayal of the truth of the Word; in fact, it ought always to be administered in combination with the spoken Word.

Marcel commented,

... if the Word can exist and be complete without the sacraments, the sacraments can never be complete without the Word (Marcel 1953, 35; Cf. Berkov 1932, 2:224).

Calvin taught,

The person who supposes that the sacraments confer any more upon him than that which is offered by the word of God, and which he receives by a true faith, is greatly deceived (Naglee 1987, 67).

Water baptism cannot stand on its own, nor can its efficacy be subject to human orchestration (1 Cor. 1:17). In the New Testament it never stands in isolation; nor is it associated with a particular leader, however apostolic (1 Cor. 1:11-15). Its proper administration is always in association with the Word (Eph. 5:26), with the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5-6; John 3:5), and with the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, viz., his propitiatory death and bodily resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4; 1 Pet. 3:21; 1 John 5:6-9). Any sacerdotal aspect associated with baptism must have as its foundation the finished work of Christ which constitutes the essence of his Melchizedek priesthood.

Sacraments are not, as the Roman Catholic Church teaches, the *exclusive* channels of grace, but like the Word, they are none the less channels (Marcel 1953, 45).

### **"Sacramental" or "Salvific" Necessity**

The Council of Trent declared,

If anyone says that baptism is optional, that is, not necessary for salvation, let him be anathema ([Denz 1618] (De Ferrari, 1967, 63).

A thing can be a necessity, however, and yet be pale by comparison to something else. This accounts for Paul's affirmation: "God did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 1:17). To put it another way, it might be supposed for the sake of argument that baptism be considered the

*instrumental cause*, for the elect only, provided the greater causes were clearly in view. In that case Christ himself would be the *incarnational cause* because "the government will be on his shoulders" (Isa, 9:6). His Atonement would be the *efficient cause* "because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Heb. 10:14). The word of the Gospel would be the *propositional cause* because "he chose to give us birth through the word of truth" (James 1:18). The Holy Spirit would be the *regenerative cause* because Jesus said "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3:6). Faith would be the *immediate cause* since

"the word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved (Rom. 10:8-10).

As for the word *instrument*, Jonathan Edwards dismissed the Reformation idea that faith was the *instrument* of justification.

It must be owned, this is an obscure way of speaking, and there must certainly be some impropriety in calling it an instrument wherewith we receive or accept justification; for the very persons who thus explain the matter, speak of faith as being the reception or acceptance itself; and if so, how can it be the instrument of reception or acceptance? Certainly there is a difference between the act and the instrument (1879, 1:624).

But Edwards's argument would not apply to baptism, since baptism as an outward form could be distinguished from the reception itself, an inward act of the heart (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Rom. 10:9-10). If the act of baptism is viewed as a

*covenant transaction*, baptism could conceivably be designated the *outward instrument* whereby the believer *publically affirms* or *seals* his justification (1 Pet. 3:21; Acts 22:16; cf. Rom. 10:10).

But to call baptism the instrumental *cause* is quite another matter, if Augustine's definition of a sacrament be accepted. Augustine defined a sacrament as "a visible form of an invisible grace." An outward form is inanimate and can hardly be said to cause justification. Paul clearly distinguished between the "form" of religion and the "power" of it (2 Tim. 3:5). And we had best abandon the term *cause* in reference to baptism, since what was true of circumcision must also be true of the outward sign of baptism--it contributes nothing to our justification (Rom. 4:11).

If we rule out *cause*, might *condition* be an appropriate designation for baptism? Berkov preferred "instrumental *condition*" over "instrumental *cause*" as a designation for *faith* (1932, 2:228). But could baptism also be considered a *condition* of justification? Jonathan Edwards in his *Justification by Faith* defined condition in the following way:

If it be that with which, or which being supposed, a thing shall be, and without which, or it being denied, a thing shall not be, we in such a case call it a condition of that thing. But in this sense faith is not the only condition of salvation or justification; for there are many things that accompany and flow from faith, with which justification shall be and without which it shall not be, and therefore are found to be put in Scripture in conditional propositions with justification and salvation. . . ; such are love to God, and love to the brethren, forgiving men their trespasses, and many other good qualifications and acts (1879, 1:623).

While *condition*, as Edwards defined it, would certainly apply to faith, as well as to works, it would only apply to baptism in the positive sense ("with which, or which being supposed, a thing shall be"): "Whoever believes and is baptized shall be

saved" (Mark 16:16a). It would not, apply in the negative sense ("without which, or it being denied, a thing shall not be"): "Whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16b).

In the corollary of the command to baptize, therefore, baptism is mentioned as a conditional norm for salvation, in an outward instrumental sense; but there is no mention of its absence being a conditional norm for condemnation. Neither is there any such mention anywhere else in the New Testament, except possibly John 3:5: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." The next verse, however, reveals the emphasis Jesus was making: "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." Jesus' essential point, if indeed the "water" in verse five refers to baptism (and not the water of natural birth), was that *water baptism is not enough*. That is perfectly clear from verse six which mentions only the Spirit as being regenerative.

To press Jesus words in John 3:5 so literally in their negative application ("no one can enter") without the qualification of verse 6, is to distort the meaning of Jesus's statement. From the cross he told the penitent thief ". . . today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43); yet there is no suggestion whatsoever that the dying thief had been baptized with water. This is not to minimize the command to baptize in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19); it is simply to recognize that baptism, strictly speaking, does not fully qualify as a *condition* of justification.

Notwithstanding its shortcoming as a cause or a condition of justification, baptism does play a key role in the missionary advance of the church as evident from the following examples:

- Only when the Syrian commander Naaman's reluctance to wash himself seven times in the River Jordan was overcome was his leprosy cured (2 Kings 5:13-14).
- To seal a dramatic conversion experience, Saul of Tarsus was told by Ananias "Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16).

- Christian missionaries frequently report that, among many native peoples hostile to the Christian faith, baptism represents the last "hold-out" or point of resistance to the Gospel; and when that resistance is overcome, conversion follows.

While some might argue that the above illustrations pertain to adults, the baptism of children and infants represents a decisive point in terms of the believing parent's total commitment, much as the circumcision of Moses' son did for the commitment of Moses and his wife (Acts 16:15; Exod. 4:24-26; cf. Exod. 10:10' Joshua 24:15). No less in the case of infants than Beasley-Murray acknowledged to be the case with respect to adults, baptism "sets in motion the action it represents" (1963, 43). This was Richard Baxter's view of infant baptism:

If it be the duty of all Christian parents solemnly to engage their children to God in covenant (whereby they are engaged to the Lord as their God in Christ, and again doth covenant to take them for his people) then they ought to do it in baptism, which is the mutually engaging sign (1651, 109).

This accords with Samuel Hopkins's view that infant baptism, properly administered, was a *covenant transaction* (1811, 2:282-283)

While baptism is *instrumental* for the salvation of sinners and their entry into the church, Roman Catholic De Ferrari overstated the case when he said,

The question of justification without the symbol is not posed in the New Testament. There the faith of the Christian in Christ the Redeemer is determined in the symbol (1967, 2:67).

In the first place, the example of the thief on the cross does raise the question of "justification without the symbol." More

significantly, the apostle Paul made the point in his letter to the Romans by holding up Abraham as "exhibit A" of justification by faith: "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (Rom. 4:11). De Ferrari's statement needs further correction, however, because the "faith of the Christian in Christ the Redeemer" is not "determined" in the symbol--rather it is *sealed* in the symbol. The Christian's faith is *determined* "in Christ" and in him alone (Eph. 1:11)!

While we should not designate baptism the *cause* of justification or imply that it is "absolutely necessary for all unto salvation," we must recognize that baptism is "obligatory in virtue of the divine precept." This has been the historic Protestant position (Berkov 1932, 2:227-228).

Though Pierre Marcel would not have used the Council of Trent term *causa instrumentalis* to describe baptism, he too spoke of the *necessity of precept* (1983, 56). Neither the Reformers nor Marcel was suggesting that baptism could be reduced to a legal *precept*, however; for in that case it would be a mere ordinance, and not a *sacrament*. The command to apply the sign is not a hollow precept; and the sign is not a hollow sign--a mere "beating of the air." Since the sign of baptism is a visible expression of the Word, and a mysterious union exists between the sign and the thing signified, baptism, properly administered, is a *seal* as well. Baptism, accordingly, is a *sacrament*, and not a mere ordinance; in fact, in certain instances it could be regarded as the *sacramental instrument* of justification.

John Calvin wrote in his *Commentary* on Isaiah 6:7,

In the sacraments the reality is given to us along with the sign; for when the Lord holds out a sacrament, he does not feed our eyes with an empty and unmeaningful figure, but joins the truth with it. . . [W]e ought to believe that [the truth] must never be separated from the signs, though it ought to be distinguished from them (Crampton 1993b, 93).

William Ames was right when he said,

The primary end of a sacrament is to seal the covenant. And this occurs not on God's part only but secondarily on ours, for not only are the grace and promises of God sealed to us but also our thankfulness and obedience to him ([1629] 1983, 198).

Of course, in the case of infant baptism, the parents engage in the covenant on their children's behalf until the time when the children are capable of confirming before the church the covenant engagements previously made on their behalf. The covenant sign serves the understanding of the participants as an informing sign, serves their memory as a reminding sign, and serves their faith as a sealing sign (Ames [1629] 1983, 196-7).

There is a necessity in baptism that surpasses legal *necessity of precept*. Baptism is not simply a matter of obedience for obedience's sake; there is a divine purpose and intention inherent in the command, and spiritual content closely associated with the sign. But a *sacramental* union implies only a *sacramental* necessity--and not a *salvific* necessity.

Baptism cannot be defined as the *efficient cause* of salvation, since it is but a visible, palpable appendage to the Word--salvation's *propositional cause*. Baptism is empty without the Word and powerless apart from the Holy Spirit--salvation's *regenerative cause*. For these reasons, water baptism *per se* cannot be regarded as a *saving* necessity. Only in an *imperative* sense can it be so regarded--but this is nothing more than the *necessity of precept*. Because baptism may be regarded as the *sacramental instrument* of salvation, however, the necessity for baptism can be regarded as a *sacramental or sealing* necessity.

## **Sacrament or Superstition**

It was Augustine who seemed to bind salvation to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Augustine held that without baptism, the "sacrament of salvation," and without the Eucharist, the "sacrament of life," man cannot attain salvation and life eternal (Naglee 1987, 63).

The first thing that needs to be said concerning this highly sacramentarian statement is that these words did not necessarily represent, even for Augustine, the superstition that might be apparent to a modern reader. For in his commentary on *John's Gospel*, Augustine affirmed,

In the elect alone do the sacraments effect what they symbolize (Calvin 1960, 2:1290).

The second thing that should be noted concerning Augustine's apparent high sacramentarianism is that in the first instance he was not speaking *ontologically*, but *imperatively*. A person whose heart remained in contempt of Christ's instituted sacraments could not attain salvation. Pelagius fostered such contempt by "not accepting original sin," and hence, not requiring baptism (Augustine *Enchir.* 13:43; PL 40:253)" (De Ferrari 1967, 2:63). If a person's unbaptized state was not the result of contempt for the sacrament, he could be saved without the water. As Calvin noted, Augustine in his *Questions on the Heptateuch*, could issue a statement which, on the surface of things, appears to contradict his own highly sacramentarian statement quoted above:

There can be invisible sanctification without a visible sign, and on the other hand a visible sign without true sanctification (Calvin 1960, 2:1290).

This rules out any supposed magical notion of the sacraments on Augustine's part that would usurp the sovereignty of Christ in the administration of the baptism.

In this latter case, Augustine was speaking of salvation, ontologically defined in relation to the sacrament, without regard to the intention of a man's heart. He would not have conceded that a person could be invisibly sanctified without a visible sign, if the person's heart held the sacrament in contempt; nor would he have posited that a person could remain unsanctified with a visible sign provided the person's heart was spiritually responsive to Christ.

This distinction was critical for the Geneva Reformer, John Calvin who commented that a sacrament is "separated from its truth by the unworthiness of the recipient, so that nothing remains but a vain and useless figure. But that you have not a sign empty of truth but the matter with the sign, you must apprehend in faith the word which is included there" (1960, 2:1291).

The Roman Catholic Church recognized the matter of the *intent* in the case of one who was physically prevented from being baptized. Where the intention of a person's heart was to be baptized, or to have his child baptized, the *command* to be baptized was regarded in some salvific sense as having been fulfilled.

It is acknowledged that Baptism of desire cleanses from original sin and remits all personal sins. It does not give the character peculiar to Baptism or incorporate the person into the Church with the ability to receive the other Sacraments (De Ferrari 1967, 2:63).

Certainly this approach to the application of the covenant sign would allow for the salvation of David's child though he died without receiving the circumcision. It would also allow for the salvation of the thief on the cross who, though he did not receive the sacrament, did witness Christ's Passion, and was promised union with Christ in Paradise that very day (Luke 23:43).

Were Rome to make such a sacramental concession in regard to the Mass, with its doctrine of transubstantiation, that might be the undoing of its hold upon its constituents. For if Augustine was right in describing a sacrament as a *visible form of an invisible grace*, salvation is by the Spirit of God acting in concert with the regenerative Word upon the sinner's heart. Following that highly offensive sermon in which he challenged his hearers to eat his body and blood, Jesus made this very point to his bewildered disciples: "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (John 6:63).

The Roman Church's acquiescence in two major points set forth by the Westminster Assembly--that salvation can occur without the physical act of baptism, and that a person can be lost even with it--would also seem to have rendered meaningless its own doctrine of *ex opere operato*. By defining "saving necessity" in terms of a moral imperative, and not in ontological terms, one might falsely conclude that the Roman Church has remarkably acceded to the Protestant principle--the acknowledgment that baptism is a sign and seal of the righteousness that comes by faith (Rom. 4:11). Would that it were that simple!

The Roman Church's concept of *baptism of desire* represents a highly involved kind of mental sophistry designed to maintain an ontological sense of baptism's saving necessity. In other words, the person who is not really baptized is regarded, by virtue of his desire, as having been physically baptized--as though physical baptism is imputed to him. It is a kind of water-baptismal imputation on the basis of the "primordial Sacrament"--a designation for Christ. *Though Rome denies Christ the prerogative of imputing righteousness directly to the believer, it assumes for itself the right to impute baptism to one who has not had it, but who desires it!* Indeed "today it is said that the contact the apostles had with the 'primordial Sacrament,' . . . made it unnecessary for them to receive Baptism." In this way the Roman Church has managed sacramentally to save the thief on the cross. The Roman Church holds that the "Sacrament adds

something to the word; the Sacrament confirms what the word has bestowed and produces a more permanent bond with Christ" (De Ferrari 1967, 63, 67).

The degree to which the Roman Church clings to the saving necessity of water baptism is seen in a statement of policy in a post-Vatican II article in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. It is a long way from the simple statement that "there is an organic bond between Baptism and faith" (De Ferrari 1967, 67):

Because baptism is necessary for salvation whenever it can be given, it is commonly held that in case of danger of death one should not wait to baptize until actual birth. A skilled person is permitted to baptize in the womb, but if the child can be baptized when born also, Baptism should be conferred then conditionally [CIC c. 746]. For a valid Baptism the water must flow directly upon the fetus, which must be viable. Thus the membranes are ruptured and Baptism conferred through the use of a syringe or some other irrigating instrument (De Ferrari 1967, 66).

This is an invasive sacramentarianism unknown in the biblical record, unnecessary by biblical standards, and unauthorized by biblical authority. Rome would probably justify it on the ground that the Incarnation began in a woman's womb. This chicanery, not unlike the doctrine of transubstantiation, clearly illustrates the distinction Louis Berkov made in 1932:

In distinction from the Roman Catholic Church, the Churches of the Reformation emphasize the priority of the Word. While the former proceeds on the assumption that the sacraments contain all that is necessary for the salvation of sinners, need no interpretation, and might therefore be inclined to ask, why the Church needs the Word at all; the latter regard the Word as absolutely essential, and merely raise the question, why the sacraments should be added to it (2:224).

In the Scriptures Christ is designated the *Word*, but never as the *Sacrament*, unless *sacrament* be defined as *covenant*, as Calvin defined it (Naglee 1987, 66). In that case, Christ could be considered the *Sacrament* in keeping with Isaiah's prophecy: "I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people" (Isa. 42:6b). To say that Christ is the *Sacrament* in the sense of *Covenant*, however, is a far different thing than to say that the physical substance of the sacrament *becomes* Christ. There is a propositional aspect to a covenant that defines the *seal* associated with the Spirit, to identify, define, and interpret the Spirit's work. Otherwise baptism readily degenerates into superstition, and the Christ associated with it into a christ different from the one the apostles preached, however ancient or massive may be the institution that it represents.

The Church of England, following Rome, deliberately provided for private baptism in certain circumstances noting the connection between baptism and salvation implied in John 3:5, "lest baptism as an instrument for salvation should be undervalued" (Wood 1910, 2:401, Note). Calvin took exception to the Church of England and to the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession* (art. ix) in this regard. He did not believe that baptism was of such importance as to require its administration by the hands of a layman apart from the assembled church (1960, 2:1320-21).

Calvin had stated,

It is wrong for private individuals to assume the administration of baptism; for this as well as the serving of the Supper is a function of the ecclesiastical ministry (1960, 2:1320).

The Westminster Assembly stood with Calvin on this issue insisting that baptism be conducted "by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto" (WCF 1946, XXVIII, ii).

Pierre Marcel differed with Calvin. "It is not the *privatizing* but the *contempt* of the sacraments which renders us culpable before God" (1953, 56-57). Marcel may have had in

mind the biblical example of a layman in Damascus baptizing Saul of Tarsus in obedience to the Lord. Yet there is no explicit statement that Ananias actually performed the baptism, though he commanded it (Acts 9:18; 22:16).

Calvin reasoned that "infants are not barred from the Kingdom of Heaven just because they happen to depart the present life before they have been immersed in water" (1960, 2:1323). "Baptism is not so necessary that one from whom the capacity to obtain it has been taken away should straightway be counted as lost" (1960, 2:1349).

Calvin obviously did not view the matter of *necessity* in the same way that the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, or the Lutheran Church did. The Geneva Reformer only went so far as to emphasize the importance of baptism as the Lord's appointed sign and seal.

Not that such graces are included and bound in the sacrament, so as to be conferred by its efficacy, but only that by this badge the Lord declares to us that He is pleased to bestow all these things upon us [*Instit.*, IV, xv, 14] (Wood 1910, 2:401).

In summary, the only sense in which the term *baptismal regeneration* applies to infant baptism is in a *sacramental correlative* sense (Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21), or, which is the same thing, in the Pauline sense that baptism, being the New Testament counterpart of circumcision, represents a *sign* and *seal* of the righteousness that comes by faith (Rom. 4:11). Indeed, the church would do well to avoid the use of the term *baptismal regeneration* altogether.

Few realize how much injury the dogma that baptism is necessary for salvation, badly expounded, has entailed. . . . For where the opinion has prevailed that all are lost who have not happened to be baptized with water, our condition is worse than that of God's

ancient people--as if the grace of God were now more restricted than the law! For men will think that Christ has come not to fulfill the promises but to abolish them [cf. Matt. 5:17], seeing that the promise (which was then effective enough of itself to confer salvation before the eighth day) [Gen. 17:7; cf. v. 12] now would not be valid without the aid of a sign (Calvin 1960, 2:1321).

It might even be worthy of consideration to dismiss the term sacrament and substitute the term covenantal seal--a more biblical expression, and a more functional definition--one that is less subject to misunderstanding.