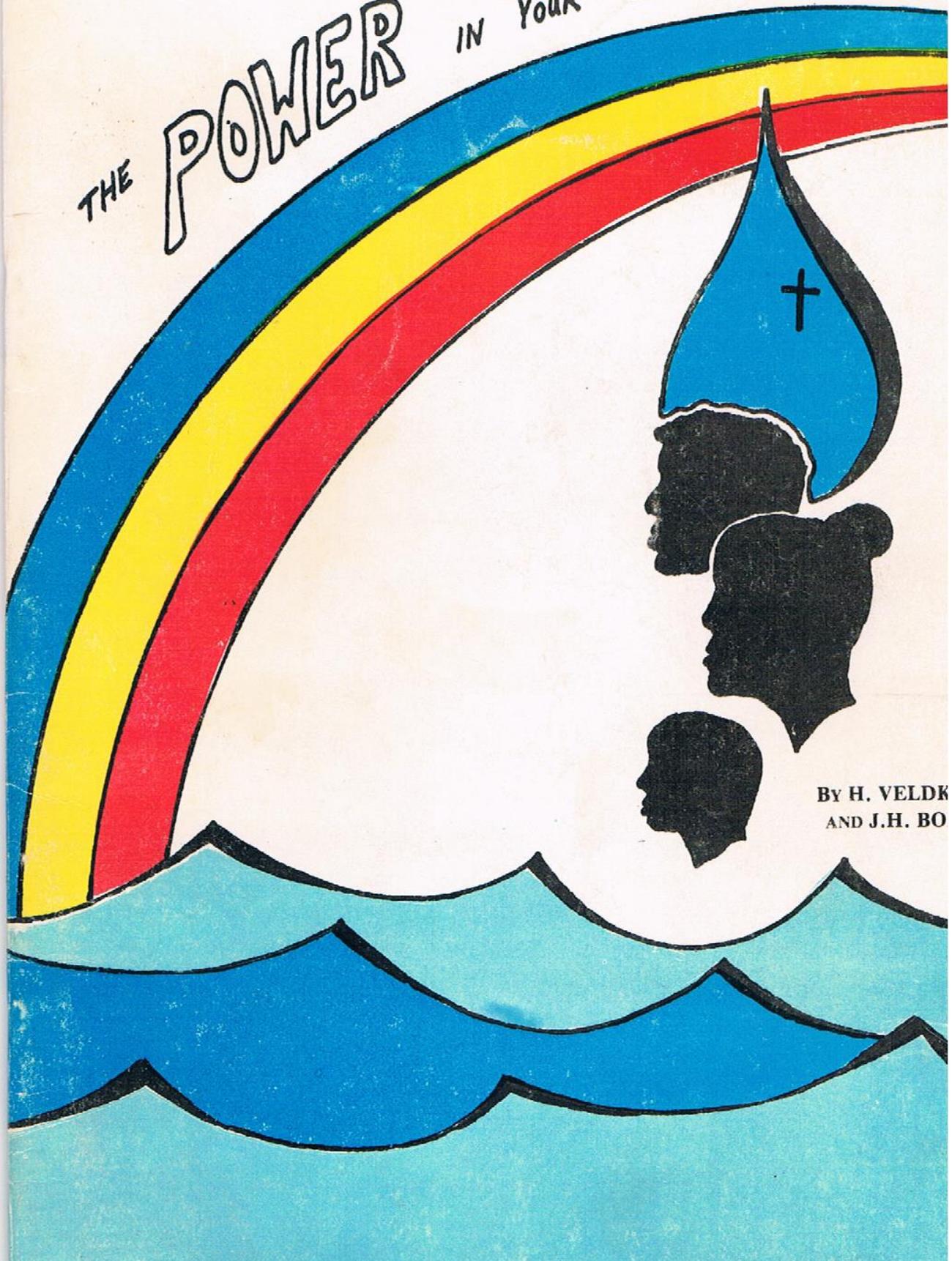


# THE POWER IN YOUR BAPTISM



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# **THE POWER IN YOUR BAPTISM**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Protestant church recognizes only two sacraments, the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion and Baptism. Of these two, a faithful member takes part in the Lord's Supper many times, but he is baptized only once. Chances are good that he is baptized as an infant and thus cannot remember the event at all. This circumstance may well be the reason few people spend much time thinking about their Baptism. It happened in the distant past and it hardly serves any further role in the life of most Christians.

This pamphlet explains the meaning of Baptism, including infant Baptism. It emphasizes the continuing significance of the one Baptism for the rest of one's life. We hope that it will contribute to a deeper appreciation of Baptism as a source of constant comfort, strength and growth.

The discussion is based upon the teaching of Baptism as found in the Heidelberg Catechism. Most churches have creeds, official statements of their basic doctrines. Many such creeds are used by more than one denomination. Probably the most common one is the Apostles' Creed to which nearly all churches subscribe. Lutheran churches have some creeds used only within the Lutheran denomination. Churches of the Presbyterian-Reformed tradition have also produced a number of such creeds. Perhaps the most well-known creeds of this tradition are the Westminster Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. The Westminster Confession is accepted in most Presbyterian churches, while the Heidelberg Catechism has been officially adopted both by the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRCN), centered in Taraba State with its headquarters in Takum, and by the Church of Christ Among the Tiv (NKST) in Benue State with its headquarters in Mkar, near Gboko. The Tiv church requires of her pastors that they preach regularly on the subjects discussed in this Catechism to ensure a well-rounded programme of preaching. The document has been translated into both Hausa and Tiv and both translations are available from Lamp and Word Books, P.O. Box 24, Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria. It is our hope that this pamphlet will stimulate greater interest and understanding of Baptism among the churches, including those who do not accept infant Baptism.

In this pamphlet we generally follow, though with major adaptations, a commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism by H. Veldkamp entitled *Zondagskinderen* (Franeker, The Netherlands: T. Wever). We are grateful both to Wever Publishing Co. and to Paideia Press of St. Catharines, Canada, for permission to translate and adapt the original for Nigerian purposes.

## HEIDELBERG CATECHISM SECTION 26

**Question No. 69:** How does holy Baptism remind you and assure you that Christ's one sacrifice on the cross is for you personally?

**Answer:** In this way: Christ instituted this outward washing (Mat. 28:19; Acts 2:38). And with it gave the promise that, as surely as water washes away the dirt on the body, so certainly His blood and His Spirit wash away my soul's impurity, in other words, all my sins (Mat. 3:11; Rom. 6:3-10; I Pet. 3:21).

**Question No. 70:** What does it mean to be washed with Christ's blood and Spirit?

**Answer:** To be washed with Christ's blood means that God, by grace, has forgiven my sins because of Christ's blood poured out for me in His sacrifice on the cross (Eph. 1:7-8; Heb. 12:2, I Pet. 1:2; Rev. 1:5; Rom. 3:24-25). To be washed with Christ's Spirit means that the Holy Spirit has renewed me and set me apart to be a member of Christ so that more and more I become dead to sin and increasingly live a holy and blameless life (Eze. 36:25-27; John 3:5-8; Rom. 6:1-11; I Cor. 6:11; Col. 2:11-12).

**Question No. 71:** Where does Christ promise that we are washed with His blood and Spirit as surely as we are washed with the water of Baptism?

**Answer:** In the institution of Baptism where he says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mat. 28:19). "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). This promise is repeated when Scripture calls Baptism "the washing (water) of regeneration" (Titus 3:5) and "the washing away of sins" (Acts 22:16).

### A PERSONAL QUESTION

Read Question No. 69 above.

There are several items in this question that deserve our full attention. To begin with, we see that in Baptism we think only of Christ. Baptism has no meaning of itself. Its only true meaning is Christ. To speak about Baptism without speaking of Christ is like talking about the great wealth of a king without thinking of the king himself. Thus the Catechism stresses from the beginning that the basic meaning of Baptism is "Christ's one sacrifice on the cross." It asks what guarantee Baptism offers that this sacrifice of Christ holds true for *me*. That is what Baptism is all about. It is a *sign* and a *seal*. As a *sign*, it teaches us something, namely the promise of the Gospel. As a *seal*, it *assures* us that this one single sacrifice on the cross has value for us.

There is this *personal* element. The question is not whether or not I have been baptized or even whether I understand it clearly. The question is whether or not I am sure that Christ's sacrifice has value for *me*. I know that Christ made this sacrifice, but do I also know that He made it for *me*? Everyone must know this, because it is impossible to look at the cross from a neutral point of view, objectively. If Baptism is not for my *profit*, then it becomes my *loss*, for it will work against me.

The Catechism points to Baptism as the way to this assurance. Baptism teaches and assures me that Jesus Christ has died and risen for me. But *how* does Baptism assure us of this? Often we lack this assurance within ourselves. We try to measure whether or not our sorrow for sin is deep enough or whether our prayers are sincere enough. Such questions lead us nowhere. The water of Baptism itself, whether by sprinkling or immersion, is the way to certainty of our faith.

The translation of the Catechism we use asks how we *share* in Christ's sacrifice. Some other translations stress a more passive role on our part: How is this sacrifice applied to us? How does it avail for us? In Baptism we are wholly passive; we add nothing to ourselves. If we were baptized as infants, we would not even know about it if no one told us. The stream of God's mercy just rolled right over us without our realizing it. It applies to us without our having noticed it. In the Lord's Supper we are active in our remembrance and fellowship, but in Baptism we are wholly passive. We add nothing of our own.

Now read the Answer to Question No. 69.

This answer is written in clear and courageous language. In short, Baptism assures me that I am *really* washed of *all* my sins by the blood of Christ. Of course, this is not the only one of the benefits that are promised to us. Besides this washing away of our sins by Christ, there are the blessings that come to us from the Father and the Holy Spirit as well, for we are baptized into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We will discuss these other blessings after a little while.

The Catechism stresses the washing away of our sins because the water of Baptism is such a striking example of the blood of Christ. God has given ordinary water the power to wash away the filth of our bodies. Thus water is a beautiful symbol of the cleaning power of Christ's blood that washed away all our sins. Ordinary water washed our bodies; Christ's blood cleans our souls, our hearts, our selves.

The water of Baptism is not only a symbol of the blood of Christ. It is also more than that: it is the promise of a fact; it *assures* us that our sins are washed away. In Baptism we hear the voice of God saying, "You *are* cleansed of your sins!" Baptism is a seal from God Himself, a firm promise that does away with all doubt: you *are* washed.

Note well that we are not told that I **will** be washed some time in the future, but I **am** washed as surely as I have been baptized. It is not an uncertain chance, a possibility; it is a fact, a sure fact. Neither is this a promise that holds for the future. Baptism teaches and assures us of what has already happened. This spiritual blessing is as sure and as real as the Baptism of my physical body. Forgiveness of sins is not the result of Baptism, but it is a gift from God. And this is why it is sure, for **God's** promises never fail, no more than my eyes fool me when I see a baptism. If we ever doubt our forgiveness or wonder whether Christ's blood applied to **me**, we can remember our baptism and be assured once again. God Himself has promised forgiveness and He has sealed it, guaranteed it in my Baptism.

Thus, Baptism is not just something one does in church, something that is the proper thing to do, a good custom, something that happened to me long ago as a child, but that has no effect on me now. No, when I was baptized, God in a visible way assured me of His promise of forgiveness of all my sins. He now **owes** me something. He has the debt of that promise to live up to and I can always appeal to this promise. From the moment of my Baptism, God is no longer free to do with me as He pleases, but He is tied to His own promise. If you are baptized, you know for sure, or you **can** know, that you are clean and forgiven, for God Himself has said it.

God is no longer free! This is a daring statement and one that is difficult for people to understand, especially for our Muslim neighbours. Of course, no one forces God to do anything. God is free. However, we should not tie God up in His freedom. God is also free to place obligations upon Himself, which is just what He did. In His love for sinners, God has **freely** made this promise to us in Baptism. He has **freely** tied Himself to us. But after He has done so freely, without force, He is now tied to His own promise towards us. He owes us something. He has tied Himself **freely** to us in love.

After a person, whether infant or adult, has been baptized in the presence of the congregation, no member of the congregation will doubt the fact that this person has been baptized. Everyone has seen it with his own eyes. It is true without a doubt. It would be silly to ask, "Is he really baptized?" It is almost as silly for us to ask, "Am I really washed of all my sins?" That is no longer a question. There is no "perhaps" about it. As surely as I have been baptized, so surely are my sins forgiven.

It may be thought that this language is too strong. Is every baptized person saved? Is it not true, according to the Bible, that "not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants" (Rom. 9:6)? Indeed, it is true! But, we must remember that the Catechism is speaking of the church of Christ, of believers. Hypocrites are those who reject the promises of God and do not belong to the church. They are simply ignored here in the Catechism. They do not confess or

believe in their Baptism. We are here speaking of the believer who says, "I am washed of all my sins and my baptism is a guarantee of this fact."

We do not make such claims about ourselves because we are better than other people. Definitely not! After all, we cannot understand Baptism or agree with its meaning and apply it to ourselves unless we have first accepted the judgement upon which it is based. Baptism tells me, first of all, that I am unclean, unholy, and that I need to be washed. I begin by humbling myself and confess my sinfulness. I must know that my salvation does not depend on my goodness, but on Christ's. Only then can I confess that Baptism is a seal, a guarantee that my sins are forgiven in Christ.

In this way, Baptism sheds a ray of light throughout all our days. It is a fountain of certainty from which we can drink at any time. It provides a basis from which we can constantly make our appeals to God. True, unlike the Lord's Supper, we experience the sacrament of Baptism only once and often when we are not even conscious of it. Nevertheless, its fruit is **constant, daily** joy and peace and certainty.

When we pray, "Forgive us our debts," we are assured that God will hear, for He has so promised in Baptism.

And all of this comes only from what the Son does for us in Baptism. But we are baptized into the name of the Father and of the Holy Spirit as well. When we are baptized into the name of the Father, God the Father witnesses to us and assures us that He has made us an eternal promise called the "covenant of grace." God becomes our ally in the battle of this life, an ally who has at His command all possible forms of aid and support and who will **never** forsake us.

In addition, the Father assures us through Baptism that He adopts us as His children and heirs. We are not only allies, but we are His children, a very close and intimate relationship. Because of this, He provides us with all good things, turns away all evil **or** turns this evil to our profit.

When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," we can be sure God hears and will provide in His own way, for so He has promised us in Baptism.

We are also baptized in the name of the **Holy Spirit**. The Spirit sees to it that we will appear without spots. He keeps us from leaving the narrow way. Baptism in the name of the Spirit is a guarantee of the perseverance of the saints.

When we pray not to be led into temptation but to be delivered from evil, we can be sure God will hear us, because He so promised in Baptism.

We lay the responsibility of our whole lives upon the Spirit, from our first adoption as God's children till we join the gathering of the elect in heaven. We are assured ahead of time of being

taken care of completely, both physically and spiritually. If we constantly keep our Baptism before us, day after day, and teach our children likewise, what then can possibly overtake us?

But what of the Baptism of those who do not believe, who have broken with God's covenant? Does Baptism say nothing to or about them? Was it not a guarantee from God to them? Or was the promise spoken over them not sincerely meant? The answer is a very clear: it was and is!

No one can escape his Baptism or its effect. Even he who breaks with the covenant carries with him at all times the knowledge that he was baptized and this knowledge serves to accuse him right till he rests in his grave. The Bible says that the Word of God is a two-edged sword and becomes a force unto death for him who hears but rejects it. Likewise, when one rejects his Baptism, God will not forget and it will turn against the person. Baptism is and remains a guarantee, even for those who reject it, but then it becomes a guarantee of judgement. As we can eat and drink at the Lord's table unto judgement (I Cor. 11:29), so one can drown in the water of Baptism. Baptism is described as death. In Baptism we are buried with Christ (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12), but unless we believe and are raised up again with Christ, we remain in this death. In the days of Moses, all Israel passed through the Red Sea, which is likened to Baptism, but not all were faithful and those were rejected by God (I Cor. 10:1-5). The conscience of the baptized unbeliever will not let him rest. If someday the God who baptized you says, "I do not know you," you will not be able to accuse God of not keeping His promise, but you will have to recognize His judgement upon you as just.

### ***BLOOD AND SPIRIT***

Baptism is not only a guarantee for the forgiveness of sins, but also for the renewal of our lives. That is the subject of Question and Answer No. 70. Read this question and answer once again. These two, justification (forgiveness) and sanctification (renewal of life), cannot be separated from each other. Scripture speaks not only of a Baptism unto forgiveness of our sins, but also of Baptism unto repentance. John the Baptist said, "I baptized you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me ... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Mat. 3:11). So it is with Baptism. You only see water. The preacher can only preach; he cannot give faith. Likewise, the preacher can baptize with water, but he cannot give the Spirit. Yet, behind the preacher stands Christ who does the actual work: He baptizes with His blood and with His Spirit.

We have already seen what it means to be baptized with or in the blood. It is forgiveness of our sins; it is to receive God's grace for the sake of the blood that Christ has poured out for us on the cross. In Baptism we are immersed as it were in the blood of Christ and then we arise out of this cleansing blood completely free from guilt.

But Christ does not leave it at that, for that would solve our problem only half way. Christ baptizes not only with His blood, but also with fire, that is, with the Holy Spirit. Baptism with the Holy Spirit means not only that Christ forgives, but He also makes us holy, He sanctifies us, He helps us live a new life. The fire of His Spirit burns away the pollution in our hearts. Sin is a power and that power must be broken. That is why His Spirit enters the believer's heart in order to make a new person out of him.

Christ not only gives us the right to be called children of God, but He also gives us the power to act, to behave, to live like a child of His through the Spirit, so that we once again reflect the image of God. That is the meaning of the last part of Answer No. 70.

Forgiveness and renewal belong together; they are two sides of the one coin and both are implied in Baptism. What God has joined together, man must not separate. There is the danger that we do separate them, for it is easy for us to forget what is to follow our Baptism. We all like to have our sins forgiven, but to become holy, that is something else! It is nice to be freed from guilt and punishment, but to become a new man means that we must undergo the pain of the dying of the old sinful man. We are baptized with water and that does not hurt, but it is now to become clear in our lives that we have been baptized with the fire of the Holy Spirit that has burned away all that is unholy. Can others see that in us? Is it obvious to all that the church is burning with the fire of the Holy Spirit? When you have Christ, you also have the Holy Spirit of the new life. If this new life is not visible to others, then we are not washed by the blood of Christ either. Then we only fool ourselves. The two always come together or they do not come at all.

Answer No. 70 also emphasizes once again that sanctification (becoming holy) is not our own work, but it is God working in us. Baptism means you **are** renewed, you **have** become a member of the holy Body of Christ. That is a **fact**. We do not become holy first of all through our own efforts, but we have become that through the Spirit of Christ.

To be baptized is the same as to have become a new person.

Some think that Baptism does not mean much until you have confessed your faith publicly (have been confirmed) and have shared in the Lord's Supper. But that is false, for every baptized person has been made holy and is thus basically in a different situation from that of others. A baptized sinner is like a square circle. A baptized sinner who enjoys sin has spoiled his Baptism. And if, when he lives in sin, he does not hear the warning of God in his conscience, then he has sunk low indeed.

Each baptized person is in principle a new person. Baptism makes one a member of the church, that is, a member of the Body of Christ. In the human body, each member, whether hand, head or foot, receives strength through the blood that runs through all the members. All the

mangoes of one tree draw their water through the one root. So is every baptized person united to Christ. His roots are in Christ and the new life flows from Christ, the root, to every member (John 15:1-7).

The Spirit renews me, says Answer No. 70, “so that more and more I become dead to sin and increasingly live a holy and blameless life.” This new life is a **gift** that comes to us through Baptism, but it is also a **duty**, a duty that flows naturally out of the gift. Baptism makes us a new people, holy, but we have not yet become complete saints. We have not yet arrived. The new life has to slowly grow and develop, a process of growth that includes our own efforts. In natural life God gives us life, but **we** must breathe, eat, drink, work and so on to keep life going and to develop it. So it is in our spiritual life. We must develop what God does within us. Paul says that we are to work out our own salvation, for it is God who works in us. Our own will and effort are remolded by God so that we “work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). Thus we are more and more to become dead to sin and increasingly to live a holy and blameless life. God will give us the power to do so.

True, at times we may fall into sin, but this should not lead us to doubt the effectiveness of God’s grace and power. It should not lead us to find an excuse in the devil or in any other cause, but, instead, it should lead us to think about our Baptism and the promises of God. Our weakness should not become an excuse or put us to sleep, thinking that God will not take it all that seriously. And so we could continue in sin! Absolutely not! It is possible in our weakness to fall into sin, but that is not the same as living in sin regularly and enjoying it. If we do sometimes fall, we must not begin to doubt the effectiveness of God’s work in us or think it is all lost. We must at such times remember that God is truly merciful and ready to forgive and that our salvation does not depend first of all on our own repentance or struggles, but in God’s eternal covenant or promise of grace.

God never forgets his covenant. When we appeal to Him prayerfully and humbly we **cannot** be lost. The mountains may tremble and the hills shake, but God’s grace will not remove from us and His covenant of peace is firm – it stands forever.

Jesus commanded the church to baptize in Matthew 28:19. However, Jesus’ idea of Baptism was nothing new, for John and other Jews were already baptized before that. Basically John’s Baptism and that of Jesus meant the same thing: Baptism unto repentance and forgiveness, but John limited his Baptism to the Jews, while Jesus sent His disciples into the whole world. Baptism had never been seen in such a broad perspective.

Even before John the Baptist, there was the so-called proselyte Baptism. Proselytes were Pagans who wanted to adopt the religion of the Jews. They had to be baptized, according to Jewish custom, because they were unclean. Jews, they thought, did not need to be baptized, for

they were clean. Then came John the Baptist with a truly shocking message. He told the Jews who considered themselves to be true children of Abraham and he told the proud, respected Pharisees, the leaders of the people: you *all* need to be baptized. This was like saying: you are all unclean; you need to be washed. You also are unholy and in need of repentance! That was like throwing them a bomb!

It is understandable that the Jews were terribly annoyed and insulted. Were they not good children of Abraham and circumcised? Were they not God's special people? They had forgotten that their circumcision meant the cutting away of their sinfulness. John condemned a circumcision that did not come together with repentance. Likewise, the Bible condemns Baptism if it does not result in true repentance. Such a Baptism will be turned into judgement instead of blessing.

## **HEIDELBERG CATECHISM SECTION 27**

**Question No. 72:** Does this outward washing with water itself wash away sins?

**Answer:** No, only Jesus Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins (Mat. 3:11; I Pet. 3:21; I John 1:7).

**Question No. 73:** Why then does the Holy Spirit call Baptism "the washing of regeneration" and "the washing away of sins?"

**Answer:** God has good reason for these words. He wants to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ wash away our sins just as water washes away dirt from our bodies (I Cor. 6:11; Rev. 1:5; Rev. 7:14).

But more important, he wants to assure us, by this divine pledge and sign, that the washing away of our sins spiritually is as real as physical washing with water (Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:27)

**Question No. 74:** Should infants, too, be baptized?

**Answer:** Yes. Infants as well as adults are in God's covenant and are His people (Gen. 17:7; Mat. 19:14). They are, no less than adults, promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith (Isa. 44:1-3; Acts 2:38-39; Acts 16:31). Therefore, by baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers (Acts 10:17; I Cor. 7:14). This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision (Gen. 17:9-14), which was replaced in the New Testament by Baptism (Col. 2:11-13).

### ***MORE THAN AN OUTWARD RITE***

The outward rite of Baptism can cause no one to be born again or to make him holy. However, the children of the covenant, that is, the children in the family of believers, belong to the seed made holy by God and they are baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God and of the covenant He has made with His people. Baptism does not **make** them heirs; they already **are** that. Baptism is no more than a seal of what we already are. We need such a seal, for if we look upon ourselves or upon our children, we do not have much to boast about and it almost sounds ridiculous to claim that we and our children are holy. It looks like extreme pride and arrogance to make such claims about ourselves. Indeed, it would be arrogant if we were to say this of ourselves as if **we** had made ourselves holy. But now that **God** declares this about us, we accept it eagerly with both hands. Now, if we need assurance that we belong to God's people, we do not need to dig around in our hearts, but we turn to God's seal upon us, to Baptism. When we buy a bicycle or a motorcycle, we do not first of all take the whole thing apart to see whether or not it is a good one. We merely look at the brand name. The same holds true for Baptism: we look at the brand name and see that it comes from God Himself! And when God does something, we know that it will be good and trustworthy. So we make our claim; not because we have done something ourselves, but because God has put His stamp upon us by Baptism. And even when we do sometimes fall into sin because of our weakness, we will not doubt God's mercy, for in Baptism He has given us a sure witness that we are part of His family with which He has made a covenant. That is the great value of Baptism.

We all sense something of the importance of Baptism. If, for example, the government were to forbid Baptism, most Christians would go up in arms, even the lukewarm. However, as long as it is easy for us to be baptized and there is no real danger attached, most of us regard it lightly and hardly think of it as we go through life's struggles.

It is possible to take the power and meaning out of Baptism in various ways. Question and Answer No. 72 refer to one such danger. Read it. It is the danger of looking only at the **outward** side of Baptism. It is a danger for which many Christians have fallen. It is a greater danger than those of hunger, flood and war. Let us take a good look at it.

Question No. 72 asks whether this outward washing with water itself washes away our sins. A careless reading of Answer No. 71 could lead us to answer "yes" to this. Indeed at the time of the Reformation, when the Catechism was written, it appears that the Roman Catholic Church did just that. They appeared to teach that in the baptismal water there is a hidden power that brings about our regeneration, our rebirth, so that the grace that makes us holy is as it were poured into the person baptized. That is the reason the Roman Catholic Church teaches that

without Baptism there is no salvation. If an unbaptized person is about to die and there is no priest at hand, then a layman is allowed to perform an “emergency” Baptism. Thus, Roman Catholics used to answer “yes” to this question. The outward washing of Baptism actually washes away our sins, they said. It has a magical power of its own, though given by God.

There is danger in this teaching. It emphasizes the outward sign and ignores the deeper meaning. If Baptism automatically washes away our sins, we have to do no more than be baptized. Then we would depend on our Baptism for salvation, without faith or repentance. This is not a new idea. When Israel was defeated by the Philistines, they brought the ark to the war front. They thought that if the ark was at the front, God would *have* to give them victory. They did not understand that since they no longer served God in truth and obedience, God had left them and the ark therefore was no longer a symbol of His presence amongst them. They thought the ark had a magical power of its own. That is precisely what we do when we separate Baptism from faith and think of it as having a power of its own to wash away our sins. Then we drown spiritually in the baptismal water as the ark became like a coffin to Israel.

In Protestant churches we are not free from this idea either. Do we not often identify our outward membership of the church with being a child of God itself? Do we not often think that if we take part in the Lord’s Supper we are automatically united to the vine of Christ? If only we go to church, we sometimes think, we are holy before God. We then congratulate ourselves that we are in good spiritual shape. However, this is to adopt the form of true religion without having its power. In this way of thinking we *over-value* Baptism; we expect too much from it, namely, our salvation. That is why the Catechism clearly answers, “No, only Jesus Christ’s blood and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins.”

Only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit!

**Nothing**, but **nothing** can take the place of Christ’s saving work through His blood and His renewing work through the Spirit. **Nothing** can take His place: no Baptism, no Lord’s Supper, no church attendance, no good works or prayers, no faith or repentance – **nothing!** We must all face Christ’s blood and Spirit. We are not to rest at the river of Baptism, but must go on to Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified. And from there we are to go on to Pentecost, where all were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Having said all this, we now face another misunderstanding. When it is said that “only” Christ’s blood and the Spirit can bring salvation and that these go far beyond the outward rite of Baptism, we must not conclude that the outward symbol therefore does not have value and that we can safely forget about our Baptism. It may not be despised as a useless form that we should not bother with. When the Bible says that the soul is more than the body, it is not saying that the body has no value. Baptism is of tremendous value for our lives, but it becomes our

**destruction** if we emphasize only the outward sign, if we do not accept the blood and Spirit of Christ.

By accepting the blood and Spirit of Christ, we mean that we should not boast in all sorts of outward things or symbols. We should know that Christ died for **me** and that the Holy Spirit has renewed my life. Blood and Spirit are mentioned in one breath, because forgiveness of sins and renewal of life are inseparable. If we are saved, we must show this by the renewal of our lives. If we remember this, then we have overcome the danger of emphasizing only the outward symbol. The outward rite of Baptism is not the goal in itself, but it is the doorway, the point of entry into the covenant of Christ's blood and Spirit.

### **THE POWER OF BAPTISM**

Read Question and Answer No. 73. Why has the Holy Spirit used such strong language about Baptism that can so easily lead to dangerous misunderstanding and to being content with the outward rite? Scripture does indeed call Baptism the washing away of sins. Ananias refers to them in one breath (Acts 22:16). How can this be? Is this language not too dangerous?

God knows what He is doing and why. He had good reasons for putting it this way, even though He was aware of the real danger of misunderstanding. God foresaw another danger that was just as serious. The first danger is that of depending on the outward symbol only. The danger we now wish to stress is that of taking the content out of Baptism, of making it hollow. It is not unusual for people to concentrate their attention on Baptism as a church ceremony and then to forget it so that it serves no real function in one's struggles. Then Baptism is seen as something that occurred long ago and it does not serve to assure you of God's promises to you throughout all the days of your life. It was a ceremony without content. Thus Baptism is robbed of its deep meaning and of the strength it is meant to provide for us. This wide-spread attitude towards Baptism has led to an impoverished and weak church. God gave us Baptism and He expressed Himself very strongly about its meaning precisely because He knew of the difficulties Christians face in living the Christian life. We must see Baptism as God's pledge, God's guarantee to us of our reconciliation with Him, of His peace with us, of His having accepted us.

This is not to say that Baptism **brings about this washing**. No, but it **symbolizes** it and **seals** it, assures us of it.

Read Answer No. 73. God wants to **teach** something about Baptism. Baptism is like a visual aid in education; it shows us something. It teaches us that just as water washes away the dirt from our bodies, so our sins are washed away through the blood of Christ. But that is not all. It is not only a visible sign, but also a seal, a guarantee. It both symbolizes God's grace and guarantees

it. The Catechism says, “But more important....” That is, there is more to Baptism than just something to teach. It assures, it seals, it guarantees. God is not only a teacher who knows how to use visual aids effectively, but He is even more our faithful covenant God who through Baptism assures us that His promise is unshakable.

And what is this assured promise? As real as physical Baptism is, so real is my being washed from my sins. When a person has been baptized in front of a whole congregation, it would be folly to deny that he has been baptized. Our being washed from our sins is just as sure as that. Baptism does not flatter the person baptized. When we are baptized, it is a sign of our sinfulness that must be washed away. Baptism is a testimony to our corruption and sinfulness. It declares that we cannot find salvation and grace in ourselves, but only in Christ Jesus. We have nothing to do about it but to accept it like a child. Baptism tells us that all the treasures of the covenant or promise of God are ours; we have a right to them, a right given us by God Himself. Accept them, therefore!

To whom are the blessings of this covenant promised? In short: to all who are baptized. For their faith and hope that they need no other ground than that which God has promised in His Word and, in addition, assures us in our Baptism. If *that* is not enough for us to be convinced, what will? Or if that is too simple ...! Now we can understand why the Bible speaks so strongly about Baptism. It is that we should believe and thus gain life in His name.

Baptism declares with great emphasis to all believers and their offspring that God wants to be *their* God. This declaration is enough and we should not need some other declaration in addition to be convinced. It is only our foolishness and our pride that causes us to expect an additional declaration beyond what we have in Baptism. It is insulting to God to think we still need more. When God promised Israel that He would bring them to the promised land, He did not have to repeat this promise to each individual Israelite. Yet, there are people who want God to give them an additional sign to assure them, a private sign for themselves. This is ridiculous. Worse, it is godless. Jesus’ generation demanded signs beyond the normal promises of God and He called them “an evil and adulterous generation” that seek for a sign; but no sign shall be given them....” (Mat. 12:39 and 16:4). He could also have said, “No sign shall be given them except that of Baptism.” Baptism itself is a very special and personal sign that we must accept and which means that I *personally* share in its accompanying promises that God has given to the church as a whole. He who demands more for himself downgrades his Baptism, makes it hollow, weak, and he will not profit from it. We are to profit from our Baptism simply by accepting God’s promises and by saying, “Lord, in Baptism You have promised me Your grace. Now do as You have promised.”

Unfortunately, many Christians make their Baptism hollow.

When I was baptized, I was, as it were, immersed in the promises of God's grace. God sealed it to me, assured me that Jesus poured His blood for *me*. Is it then possible to feel suddenly that it no longer holds, just because it may have been many years ago? Is it possible to doubt what the whole congregation saw with their own eyes? Is this not like hitting God in the face?

Do you know where the problem lies? We always seek our salvation and our holiness within ourselves instead of in Christ. We seek to base our spiritual life on what we are for the Lord instead of on what the Lord is for us! That is why our Baptism does not seem enough. Baptism occurs quite outside of any effort of our own, especially if we are baptized as infants. We contributed nothing of ourselves. We were not even asked as children. God did not ask us whether or not we wanted to enter into an agreement with Him. He simply declared, "I establish my covenant with you." It was an announcement. Let us get it straight, therefore; Baptism does not declare that we are such loving, obedient children. Instead, it declares that God is a loving God. And now He expects from us that we walk before Him in thankful obedience.

After all this, is it possible for a baptized person to be lost? Yes, indeed it is. Take the sun for example. A candle lying in the hot midday sun gets soft. Clay, on the other hand, gets hard from the sun. The difference lies not in the sun, but in the response of the materials to the sun. God does not take two different attitudes towards those who are baptized, but we can respond to His Baptism in two ways, either in faith or in unbelief. When a school teacher promises his class he will take them some place, the promise holds for all children. If, however, one child was dismissed from school that day because of disobedience, it is not that he was not included in the promise of the teacher, but he excluded himself through his disobedience. The promise of Baptism covers every baptized person, but one can exclude oneself by disobedience. When one is thus excluded, it is not God's doing, but his own.

### ***INFANT BAPTISM***

Read Question No. 74: Should infants be baptized?

This question must be faced since there are individuals and churches that reject infant Baptism as unbiblical. According to them, the Bible does not teach infant Baptism and the early church did not practice it. According to this view, in the New Testament only adults are baptized – for example, the Ethiopian eunuch, Lydia, the prison warden, and so on. However, it must not be forgotten that the book of Acts in which all of these occur deals with a situation where the Gospel had just come in. Naturally, when people turn to Christ as adults, they are baptized as adults. But it is clear throughout the Bible that the Lord also wants children to share in His covenant promises. There is the fact of household Baptisms. The following verses all indicate

that when the parent(s) became Christian, a new relationship comes into existence between God and the entire household – Luke 19:9; Acts 11:14; Acts 16:15, 31, 35; Acts 18:8; I Cor. 1:16; I Cor. 7:14. These verses all indicate that the Christian family in the New Testament is considered to embrace the whole unit. It is not only the believer who is baptized, but the whole household. The argument will hardly do that there is no proof that there were children in any of these households, for then **all** would have been unusual households and **that** would have to be proved. Certainly, children are part of the discussion in I Cor. 7:14.

An apparently strong argument against infant Baptism is that Baptism is a sacrament, and sacraments have been established for believers. Young children cannot actively believe and they should therefore wait till their faith is clear and they can account for it. Furthermore, so the argument goes, Scripture has a certain order in which these things happen. It says that he who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved (Mark 16:16). It should be understood, however, that most modern Bible translations put this section in a footnote, for most scholars find reasons to doubt that this passage really belongs to the Bible. We should therefore be careful not to base too much doctrine on this passage. Furthermore, the text seems to emphasize the conditions for being saved rather than emphasize a specific order in which these conditions are met.

Of course, no one denies that Baptism is meant only for believers. God created us with a mouth and that is the reason a person, after he develops to a certain stage, can speak. He is created with the capacity for speech, but he must develop before he can actually speak. Likewise, we are created with the capacity for faith, but we need to develop this capacity before we can actively believe. It is God who has given this capacity and it is not for us to determine when one's faith becomes active. That is an additional reason we reject the idea that we must wait until a person fully believes. We must rather place God's action in the foreground, not man's. We do not establish a covenant with God, but God with us. My faith leans on God's seal of Baptism, but God does not seal His promise on basis of man's promise to Him. Our certainty is not to rest upon ourselves, not even upon our faith, but upon God.

Some think that adult Baptism is more meaningful than that of infants. In fact, infant Baptism is more profound because here God's free and merciful initiative shines most brightly. The infant that is baptized is conscious of nothing that happens to him. He is totally passive. He is not an adult who confesses his faith, who does something. He is merely a child of the covenant that possesses no more than the capacity of faith given by God. He does not yet actively believe.

To insist that a person must reach a certain age of active belief before he is baptized is to exclude him from the covenant promises of God and thus to exclude him from salvation. This would rob Christian parents of all hope for infants that have died. They would then have no basis to hope for their salvation, for they are not Abraham's seed.

Children belong to the covenant as much as adults. The church has good reasons for this teaching. Read Answer No. 74. This answer contains three statements:

1. Children as well as adults belong to the covenant of grace.
2. Therefore, they have a right to the blessings of the covenant, such as forgiveness and the Holy Spirit. Both of these apply to infants as well as adults.
3. Hence, they are also to receive the *sign* of the covenant. Through Baptism they are included in the Christian church.

Let us turn to the first point. Children belong to the covenant. If the church were just a kind of society or voluntary agency, then one could become member once he becomes old enough to make this choice. However, the church is more. It is the people of God to which also the children that are born within the bosom of the church belong. They do not *become* member on basis of adult confession or confirmation. They *are* members, even though they may not be aware of it and are not able to agree or disagree. God does not work merely with unrelated individuals, but His grace also follows the line of generations. The Bible uses the organic picture of a tree (Rom. 11:17-24) or vine into which we are engrafted. The promise is to us *and* our children, said Peter (Acts 2:39). The covenant is with Christians and their seed (Gen. 17:1-21; Gen. 22:17-18; Gen. 26:4; Gen. 28:4 and 13-14), a theme that runs all the way through the Old Testament and continues into the New Testament (Rom. 4:16-25; Rom 9:6-8; Gal. 4:28; Gal. 3:14, 29). To us Christians, the promise is to us *and* our children and to all whom the Lord calls (Acts 2:39). The promise of forgiveness and of the Spirit is to us and our seed. What is true for the old covenant in the Old Testament is true in an even wider sense in the New Testament. The covenant or promise of grace is the pipeline through which flow the stream of God's blessings and this covenant is the basis for infant Baptism.

Secondly, the promise of forgiveness and the Spirit holds for children as well as adults. What would be the value of belonging to the covenant, but not to share in its treasures? To these blessings our children have a right, for God has promised them to us and to our children.

One does not need to be adult before he shares in the *condemnation* of Adam. That is our inheritance from birth. Neither does one need to be adult to share in the *grace* of Christ. Without knowing it, our children are subject to the wrath of God and without knowing it, the children of the covenant are at the same time the subject of God's promise of grace. It is a terrible thing to share in Adam's condemnation, but it is a great blessing to share in Christ's grace. Both are realities for the children of the covenant.

The Catechism now comes to its conclusion. *Therefore*, if all this is true, then children should be made members of the church through Baptism. This is to be done through *Baptism*, not through our own confession of faith. A child of the covenant needs to be baptized as soon as

possible without delay, not because it cannot be saved if it is not baptized, but to honour God and to accept the promise of His grace in a visible way. Baptism is first of all for the child, while both parents take upon themselves the responsibility of teaching the child. But the emphasis is not first of all on the child or even on the responsibility of the parents. The emphasis is first of all on **God** who undertakes His promise.

A child becomes member of the church like a young branch or twig, but from then on it must grow and develop. That is the reason the church continuously prays that Christ will support this child by His Holy Spirit and so rule it that it will be a living branch, not a dead one that will be cut off and thrown into the fire. That prayer must also be for the parents who have such heavy responsibility. God gives the increase, but the parents are to plant and to water. Sometimes one is amazed at the mercy of God, when He overcomes the laziness and carelessness of parents who do not fulfill their promise of teaching their children or who just leave it to the church or school. But sometimes one is also saddened at the poor results of parents who do not fulfill this obligation and whose children later follow the world.

The children of the covenant must be different, says the Catechism, from those of unbelievers. This difference does not refer to the actual water of Baptism, for the water soon dries. The difference here comes from obedience to God, from a new life. **That** is the abiding sign of Baptism. It is that sign that finally will bring them into the congregation of the elect in life eternal.

While in the Old Testament the covenant was sealed by the sacrament of circumcision (Gen. 17:9-14), so Baptism is that seal in the New Testament (Col. 2:11-13). As children were circumcised and thus included in the covenant without their knowledge, understanding or agreement, so is this true in the New Testament through Baptism. The New Testament covenant is not narrower than that of the Old Testament, but wider. To exclude our children, therefore, is to go against the whole trend of Scriptural teaching.

## **Appendices 1:**

### **Biblical Basis for Infant Baptism**

Though in earlier pages we have explained the reasons for infant Baptism, we wish here to summarize the main considerations on which the practice is based. It should be understood that this section is not found in the original Dutch translation but is purely the author's own. Hence it is considered an appendix, something that does not belong to the original. It will be seen here that infant Baptism is not based on one or two specific verses in the Bible, but it is

based on a combination of Biblical facts and is a conclusion drawn from that combination. It will not do for those who disagree with infant Baptism to object that this is not a good way to arrive at a doctrine. All evangelical churches that reject infant Baptism do accept the teaching about the Trinity. This teaching is arrived at in exactly the same way as that of infant Baptism. It is based on a number of different statements scattered throughout the Bible that, when the church sought to understand them together, it arrived at the doctrine of the Trinity. If this method is legitimate for the Trinity, it is also legitimate for infant Baptism.

***The Biblical facts are:***

1. ***Children*** were included in the covenant in the Old Testament and for this reason received circumcision -- Gen. 17:7-13.
2. The covenant with Abraham includes ***Christians*** of the New Testament – Rom. 4:11, 16, 23-24; Rom. 11:16-17; Gal. 3:15-18; Heb. 6:13-18. It is one and the same covenant, though there are changes.
3. Like the Old Testament covenant, so did the New Testament covenant include entire ***families*** – Luke 19:9; Acts 16:15, 31, 34; Acts 18:8; I Cor. 1:16; I Cor. 7:14.
4. The New Testament covenant is ***greater*** than that of the Old Testament, not narrower. To exclude children in the New Testament is to make it much smaller – Isa. 54:13; Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8:11-13.
5. In the light of the above facts, it is proper to conclude from the following verses that ***link*** circumcision and Baptism that children of Christian parents ought to be baptized – Acts 2:38-39; Gal. 3:27-29; Gal. 2:11-12.

**Appendix 2:**

**Infant Baptism & Dedication**

***Author's Note:***

As with Appendix 1, so this one is not part of the original book from which most of this document is derived. However, unlike Appendix 1, this one is not the creation of the translator; it is produced and published as a brochure by Christ Community Church (CRC) of Nanaimo, BC.<sup>1</sup> I append this document because it treats frequently misunderstood concepts connected to Baptism in a very simple and clear way. It runs thus:

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<sup>1</sup>2221 Bowen Road, Nanaimo, BC, V9S 5J3.

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Some churches dedicate newborns of believing parents; other, like Christ Community, baptize infant children of Christian parents. What's the difference between the baptism of infants and dedication?

### ***Dedication: Parents Speak to God***

When Christian parents present their infant for dedication, they are saying something like this: *"God, we thank you for our newborn (S)he is a gift from You. You have entrusted him (her) to our care. We promise to do all we can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to teach our new born the way of Your Son Jesus Christ."*

In other words, with a dedication the parents speak to God. They recognize that their child is a gift and trust from God. They make a promise regarding raising their child.

### ***Baptism: God Speaks and the Parents Respond***

When Christian parents bring their children for baptism, it is God who speaks to them. Then the parents respond to what God says.

#### ***What does God say to Christian parents?***

1. God says, *"Children matter to me."*  
Let the children come to Me! Don't try to stop them. ... ***Then Jesus took the children in His arms and blessed them by placing His hands on them.*** Mark 10:16 (CEV)
2. God says, *"Since you are Christians your children are holy."*  
Your husband or wife who isn't a follower is ***made holy by having you*** as a mate. ***This also makes your children holy and keeps them from being unclean in God's sight.*** I Corinthians 7:14 (CEV)
3. God says, *"Your children are included in My promise of salvation."*  
Turn back to God! Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. ... Then you will be given the Holy Spirit. ***This promise is for you and your children.*** Acts 2:39 (CEV)

God speaks these truths to Christian parents. In response to these promises, the parents speak to God. They promise to raise their children in the way of Jesus Christ.

The Lord our God is the only true God! So love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength. Memorize His laws and ***tell them to your children over and over again.*** Talk about them all the time, whether you're at home or walking along the road or going to bed at night, or getting up in the morning. Deuteronomy 6:4-7 (CEV)

Parents, don't be hard on your children. Raise them properly. **Teach them and instruct them about the Lord.** Ephesians 6:4 (CEV)

So God speaks to Christian parents about them and their children. And the believing parents respond in loving obedience to God. This is called a "covenant." And this covenant is sealed in baptism.

### ***Baptism and Circumcision***

In the Old Testament (male) infants were circumcised as a sign of God's covenant. In the New Testament circumcision is abolished and baptism has become the new sign of the covenant.

Christ has also taken away your selfish desires, just as **circumcision** removes flesh from the body. And when you were **baptized**, it was the same as being buried with Christ. Colossians 2:11-12 (CEV)

### ***Baptism & the Church***

The promises that God makes to Christian parents and their children are made real in the believing community, the church family, the body of Christ. The promise that Christian parents make to God regarding the way they will raise their children are best fulfilled in the church. In fact, it is foreign to the Bible to speak of believers who are not connected to the believing community. In the Bible, a Christian is always assumed to be part of a church family. An ember burns hot and bright in the fire. But one that fallen out of the fire quickly dies. Likewise, a believer grows and blooms only as a living member of God's family. And as a solitary brick only becomes significant when it finds its place in a structure, so Christians together build God's beautiful temple, the church.

**You are living stones** that are being used to build a spiritual house. I Peter 2:5 (CEV)

All of you surely know that you are God's temple and that His Spirit lives within you. **Together you are God's holy temple.** I Corinthians 3:16-17 (CEV)

The best way, then, for Christian parents to raise their children in Christ's way, is in the midst of the caring body of Christ, His church. The church family takes ownership of this responsibility when God's people promise to help Christian parents raise their children in Christ's way.

They are asked, “Do you, the people of the Lord, promise to receive these children in love, pray for them, help instruct them in the faith, and encourage and sustain them in the family of believers?” And they respond, “Yes, we do, God helping us.”

### ***Baptism & Personal Faith***

When Christian parents make the promise at the baptism of their children to raise them in Christ’s way, they promise to bring their children to repentance and personal faith in Jesus Christ. Children of believing parents therefore need to embrace God’s promise made to them at their baptism. And when they do, (in the CRC) they are to publicly profess their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

*Since childhood* you have known the Holy Scriptures that are able to make you wise enough to have faith in Christ Jesus and be saved. II Timothy 3:15 (CEV)

Fight the good fight for the faith and claim eternal life. God offered it to ***you when you clearly told about your faith, while so many people listened.*** I Timothy 6:12 (CEV)

### ***PostScript:***

#### ***Translator’s Concluding Personal Remarks***

Here I, the translator, have the final say and I’m doing so in a personal tone. First, a personal secret. My wife and I are members of First CRC in Vancouver, BC, but we are also adherents of First Baptist Church in Vancouver’s downtown. We kind of divide out time between them and feel at home in both. Given this publication, how can I possibly justify that? Isn’t that totally contradictory?

Years ago, way back in my seminary days in the early 1960s, I came across two books, the authors and the titles of which I have long forgotten. They were published about the same time by the same publisher. The one defended infant baptism and the other rejected it in favour of adult or believer’s baptism. Both writers were highly respected Biblical scholars, but they came to different conclusions. This indicates to me that, though for theological reasons with which I grew up I prefer the Reformed infant baptismal way, it was not an issue during the time the New Testament was given shape. Had it been an issue, the writers, especially Paul, would have spelled it out much more clearly and perhaps rejected one.

Though the Reformed—and the Anglicans, Catholics, Presbyterians, Orthodox—practice infant baptism, they also baptize adults who come to faith later in life and were not baptized as infants. In other words, the Reformed do both.

Not so Baptists. Only adult baptism is valid for them. And not only adult baptism, but even in a specific manner, namely immersion, over against the Reformed de facto manner of sprinkling. However, First Baptist in Vancouver where we spend half of our church time, has come around and is now accepting adherents who have been baptized as infants, as long as they give themselves totally to their church and not divide themselves as we do. That is a huge concession for Baptists, and I deeply appreciate their “generous” gesture. It does not apply to us, since we *do* divide ourselves.

I just can't let go of the denomination that has nurtured and shaped me and that, in spite of its small size in Canada, has an amazing influence way beyond its size, but largely behind the scenes in ways that would surprise you. Just to make you curious, let me say this. Very few people that walk the downtown streets of Vancouver have ever even heard of the CRC. Yet, they are confronted by a major grandchild of the denomination wherever they turn, but it's incognito. Unless you bother to contact me, you will probably never discover this “secret.” And that's only one example of the way the denomination works.

And as far as the immersion factor goes, I personally prefer it to sprinkling. Sprinkling is too cheap and thin a symbol for the rising from the dead that baptism symbolizes. A tremendously powerful symbol portrayed in such a thin way. It just doesn't cut it for me.

However, for the Reformed, sprinkling has become the traditional *custom*, probably because of climatic conditions; perhaps even because water may not always have been readily available. I really don't know the background to it. *Yes, a custom, but not a theology!* We recognize immersion as totally valid and at times even practice it. I have seen it done in rivers and lakes and have even done it myself. Yes, immerse a baby in nature! I prefer it and would like the Reformed to adopt it as their preferred method. It would make the ceremony that much more meaningful and symbolic.

My Baptist brothers and sisters, thank you for welcoming my wife and me. Sorry that we can't get ourselves to join you completely, but I believe you can understand.