

REFORMED CHURCH CLANWILLIAM : SUNDAY 5 OCTOBER 2014 EVENING SERVICE

Sing before: Psalm 25:7

Let us commence this meeting with God by declaring openly to one another and to God:

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Beloved grace and peace be to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, through the mighty working of God the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Psalm of praise: 103:1

Prayer:

- **Doxology**
- **Worship**
- **Confession of sins**
- **Forgiveness**
- **Gratitude**
- **Prayer for the need of the congregation of the church, the authorities and the sinful world and appeal to God's promises**
- **General prayer**
- **Enlightenment from the Holy Spirit for the sake of the ministry of the Word.**

Amen

Psalm 102:1

Scripture reading: Acts 2:37-40; Mark 10:13-16; Colossians 2:11-12

Scripture text: Genesis 17:1-14; Catechism Sunday 27

When people discuss matters of principle, the Bible must settle the matter. But note that we may not decide what the Bible should convey through the passages referred to.

- The Bible must convey its own message, and we must accept what it says without twisting its sense.
- We may not allow any personal preferences to play any part in such matters.

It is in the light of this that we now consider what the Bible teaches us concerning baptism.

1. Let us first of all consider the role of water in baptism.

- The water used in the ceremony of baptism symbolises the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ.
- For that reason the Roman Catholic Church long ago decided that baptism is indispensable for salvation.

- In their judgement someone who had not been baptised could not enter heaven, because an important element of his salvation was missing.

The error we have here is that they ascribe to the water - which must first be consecrated - magical powers, by which the water then removes the sin of the person baptised and confers grace upon him.

This is also the error met with more and more often in the past few years. Baptism has suddenly come to be regarded as sanctifying in its own right - while it never has been such.

- The confusion here results from not distinguishing between the sign (water) and the matter signified (redemption through the blood and Spirit of Christ).
- This is like not distinguishing between a workman and his tools.

For that reason our forefathers studied the matter very thoroughly, and paid particular attention to the formulation of Question 72 on the grounds of what the Bible states. Even in those days the same matter was under discussion. What were their findings?

- Baptism does not wash away any sins; only the blood of Christ and the Holy Spirit can do so.
- Nowhere in the Bible is any power ascribed to the baptismal water.
- Just as the blood of goats and bulls in the sacrifices of the Old Testament could not remove any sins whatsoever, so, similarly, the baptismal water is equally unable to achieve this.
- But just as the blood of the sacrifices pointed ahead to the blood of Christ, so, similarly, the water points to His blood and the purification derived from that.
- In recent times discussions regarding the ceremony relate to the age of the one baptised, and to whether he should be immersed or sprinkled.
- The role of baptism is over-estimated if one attaches too much importance to the ceremony as such.

The matter is thus quite clear:

- Only God can take away sins.
- Baptism derives its significance from the blood and Spirit of Christ alone.

2. Let us consider, in the second place, the assurance God gives us.

In this connection, note two Bible passages:

Mark 16:16

"He who believes and is baptised will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.

Galatians 3:27

For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Here the Lord provides assurance regarding salvation and redemption.

But this refers not to an outward matter, but to an inward one.

That is also what the words "... clothed yourselves with Christ" specifically refer to.

God promises something, and we must accept that which the promise includes.

Let us state it in other words: We must believe.

But, note this particularly, it most certainly does not depend on a decision made by the sinner, because Titus 3:5 states as follows:

...not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,

This refers to baptism. (This is also where our Catechism derived the question.)

But take note!

- There is no reference to what the person baptised does, but definitely to everything God does.
- It is specifically stated here that we do NOTHING.

Here a divine proof is given to the sinner that

- it is not the water which is important,
- but the inward working of the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Let us emphasise:

- the focus falls not on what the person does,
- but on what God does.

If we were to depend on the opinions of men we would never be able to baptise anyone, because we are completely confused in our views of what constitutes sin and in our ethical views of life.

- The present-day heretical ministers of religion are emphatic that the person to be baptised must be an adult, so that he can "know" what it signifies, and then also make a confession of belief concerning the matter.
- No matter how adult a person is, he cannot make sinless and errorless decisions.
- In addition, no one can be certain that somebody else is not dissembling when affirming his faith. Only God knows that.
- For that reason it is possible that even an adult could receive the Sacrament unrighteously.

God prevents precisely this from happening, therefore He shifts the emphasis away from the sinner to Himself, and to what He has done for our redemption.

Once again it does not focus upon the form of the matter, but upon the essence.

Let us put it more straightforwardly:

- Baptism in itself is ineffectual
- God bestows His grace.
- He merely affirms this through baptism.

It is thus possible that many people (adults) who have been baptised will not enter heaven. Especially those adhering to a false baptism.

Let us summarise this point: It is superstition when we overestimate the outward aspects of baptism, and undervalue the inward essence.

3. Let us now, in the third place, consider the covenant of grace.

We will state this directly: If you disparage infant baptism, or oppose it or reject it, you are placing emphasis upon the wrong matters, and your insight is letting you down, because then precedence is given to the love of man, and not the love of God.

In Genesis 17 God instituted His covenant of grace with Abraham.

The Lord made a number of important statements:

- Abraham and his descendants had to uphold the covenant.
- The sign of the covenant was to be circumcision.
- This sign of the covenant had to be applied on the eighth day.

Why not to adults? Surely they know what it is about! But precisely to children, because God's promises hold for generations, and He always remains true to His promises, even if we do not realise what it signifies.

In Colossians 2:11-12 we read that circumcision and baptism have the same significance.

- Both are concerned with grace.
- Baptism is merely a fulfilment of circumcision.
- Both sacraments are outward ceremonies, but ensure the inward grace which God promised, then fulfilled, and now bestows upon us.

If the covenant of grace instituted with Abraham required that children be circumcised on the eighth day, it is quite obvious that baptism, which is a fulfilment of this Old Testament covenant, should also be administered on the eighth day.

The form is different, the administration is different, but the significance is exactly the same.

In addition it should be borne in mind that the Kingdom of God is not intended only for adults, but also for children.

- This also concerns the election.
- God does not elect adults.
- He elects people even before they are born - even before the creation of heaven and earth.
 - The Lord, for instance, said to Jeremiah:
"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations."
(Jeremiah 1:5)

Especially because baptism is, in the Bible, associated with the work of the Holy Spirit, we may not underestimate the work of the Holy Spirit in children

- Children also believe.

- They also know the Lord.
- Baptism is not a line which must be drawn before the Holy Spirit can work in the person.
- The work of the Holy Spirit and the redemption through Jesus Christ is promised no less to children than to adults.
- And because it depends on something to be received, and in no way on any personal achievement, children and adults may be baptised.

The Lord instituted the covenant with Abraham.

- Immediately then he and every male member of his household were circumcised.
- Afterwards every boy child to be born was circumcised on the eighth day, because he was born within the covenant.

We find precisely the same situation in respect of baptism in the New Testament.

- The first Jews to be baptised, had also been circumcised.
- Later, heathen/Gentiles were also baptised, and then there was the Synodal session of Acts 15, where it was determined that circumcision was no longer essential in addition to baptism, because baptism was the sign of the New Covenant.

Against this background we should consider once more what a Sacrament is

- A Sacrament (also baptism) is a holy and visible sign and a seal.
- God instituted it to enable people to understand the Gospel better.

Thus, to attempt to enforce adult baptism would be an error, because in the New Testament we first find the proselyte baptism.

- That applied to people who came to join the Jews.
- In Christendom this was also true of the first people to be baptised.
 - They were all adults.
 - Then families were baptised: parents and children.
 - When the New Covenant had been fully established, children were baptised.

We are all conceived and born in sin. Babies, as well as adults. We are all redeemed in Christ: babies, as well as adults.

- Let us therefore ascribe to the sacraments the recognition that they serve merely to remind us of this, and to enable us to understand it better.
- Let us acknowledge that they are holy, because they were instituted by God
- And let us also remember that it is God who forgives sins, without our deserving anything at all in this matter.

Come, let us listen together what the Heidelberg Catechism teaches about all these matters:

72. Q. Does this outward washing with water itself wash away sins?

A. No, only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins.[1]

[1] Matt. 3:11; I Pet. 3:21; I John 1:7.

73. Q. Why then does the Holy Spirit call baptism the washing of regeneration and the washing away of sins?

A. God speaks in this way for a good reason. He wants to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ remove our sins just as water takes away dirt from the body.[1] But, even more important, He wants to assure us by this divine pledge and sign that we are as truly cleansed from our sins spiritually as we are bodily washed with water.[2]

[1] I Cor. 6:11; Rev. 1:5; 7:14. [2] Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3, 4; Gal. 3:27.

74. Q. Should infants, too, be baptised?

A. Yes. Infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation.[1] Through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults.[2] Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant, they must be grafted into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers.[3] This was done in the old covenant by circumcision,[4] in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.[5]

[1] Gen. 17:7; Matt. 19:14. [2] Ps. 22:11; Is. 44:1-3; Acts 2:38, 39; 16:31. [3] Acts 10:47; I Cor. 7:14. [4] Gen. 17:9-14. [5] Col. 2: 11-13.

Amen.

Closing prayer.

Closing Psalm: 68:1

The Lord bless and keep you, the Lord make his face shine on you, the Lord turn His countenance to you and give peace.

Amen

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 Scripture Modern King James Version