Questions and Answers on Baptism

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Circumcision was administered only to male children in Israel—so, if baptism is circumcision's New Testament counterpart, why are both male and female children baptized? Isn't this a strike against the argument for continuity? All branches of the Christian church recognize that there is both continuity and discontinuity between the old covenant and the new covenant. The very fact that we baptize instead of circumcise is an example of this discontinuity. However, the continuity of the covenant of grace, as we discussed in chapter 1, proves dominant. It is not surprising that girls are now included in the receiving of the covenant sign. The new covenant establishes a more inclusive, free, and gracious era, and we should expect to see its sacrament of initiation become more inclusive, not less. This, in fact, remains one of the greatest issues with the baptistic view. Its doctrine of church membership and baptism presents the new covenant era as actually being more restrictive than the old covenant era.

Wasn't circumcision an identification of an individual's citizenship rather than of his belonging to the "church"? The Jewish people held the unique position of being both the covenant people of God as well as a nation—they existed as both a church and a state. We often think of these two realms as being separated. However, Israel was a theocracy; for it, the separation between church and state did not exist. A child who was born into the covenant community was recognized as a member of both the state and the church. As we noted in chapter 1, God gave the gift of circumcision to be a sacrament of the covenant of grace. It surely identified those who belonged to the nation, but it was commanded because of the significance of its function as a spiritual mark of those who belonged to the covenant people of God (i.e., the church).

Are children of believers automatically saved? No. Neither birth nor baptism secures salvation for our children, any more than Ishmael's birth and circumcision secured salvation for him. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Covenant children must possess a personal faith in Christ Jesus—one that involves knowledge, assent, and trust—in order to be saved. Therefore, we should continually point them to Christ by teaching them the Scriptures, reminding them of their baptism, praying with and for them, modeling faith in Christ before them, and participating with them in the corporate worship of the church. They themselves must believe—and if, in fact, they continue in unbelief, they will reap the sanctions that are attached to covenant unfaithfulness. Isaac received the blessing, while Ishmael received the condemnation. God's normative way of working, though, is to bring covenant children to saving faith in Christ.

Wouldn't it be consistent to practice paedocommunion along with infant baptism? No. While God commanded that children receive the sign of circumcision, he gave no command to include children in the Passover meal. The Old Testament contains commands for them to be included in the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Booths, but no such command exists regarding the Passover. In fact, we might contend that a passage like Luke 2:42, in which we see Jesus going to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast at the age of twelve, implies that younger children were excluded from participating. Even more importantly, Paul warns us against taking the Lord's Table without self-examination. A participant must be able to "discern the body," lest he or she eat or drink judgment upon himself or herself (see 1 Cor. 11:27–32). Neither children nor adults should take communion until they have professed faith and been admitted to the Table by elders of the church. And small children cannot discern the difference between the Lord's Table and snack time. They cannot, and will not, understand that communion is a remembrance of Christ's death. They cannot understand that the bread represents Christ's body, nor will they comprehend their obligation to others in the church body. They will not be able to examine themselves. And those who come to the Table unworthily, irreverently, or ignorantly defame what it signifies. Paul talks about people who became sick and even fell asleep—in other words,

died—as a result of taking the Table in such a manner (see 1 Cor. 11:30). When we make this sacrament something it isn't by giving it to our children before they make a profession of faith, we lead them into the way of not grace but judgment.

Is the baptism that John administered the same as the one that we practice? The baptism that John the Baptist administered to individuals differs significantly from the baptism that Jesus commands his disciples to observe. Luke makes a sharp distinction between them in Acts 18:25, as does Paul in Acts 19:3–5. John's baptism prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah. Therefore, its meaning "was rooted and grounded in the Old Testament," as the late Reformed teacher R.C. Sproul wrote. It served as a baptism of repentance and provided a transition from the old to the new in anticipation of the Messiah to come.

Why was Jesus baptized, then? Jesus, as the perfect man, had no need for a baptism of repentance. However, in order to identify with his people and "fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15), he willingly underwent the waters of baptism. By speaking that phrase, Jesus was alluding to Isaiah 53—the famous text on the Suffering Servant, which says, "by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities" (v. 11). Jesus, our Lord, is the Suffering Servant who came to identify with his people and to bear our iniquities so that we might be counted righteous. Picture the long line of people who are being baptized by John. Jesus, the Christ, approaches them. He has every right to condemn them all. But instead he enters the line and says, "Let me be baptized as they are baptized and be counted among them." The water baptism that Jesus received from John pointed forward to the baptism in blood that he would experience upon the cross for his people. "In his death and resurrection the core significance of both his circumcision and his baptism, and therefore of Abraham's circumcision and of our baptism, meet." Circumcision and baptism both point to the atoning death he died upon the cross for sinners.

Does baptism cause regeneration? Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 1:17 that Christ sent him to preach the gospel, not to baptize. If baptism were the primary converting means of grace, then Paul would have been sent to baptize—or at least to preach the gospel and baptize together. Yet he states that God sent him to preach the gospel only. The Word and the sacraments, while they work together, must also be differentiated. The sacraments, including baptism, primarily serve to strengthen faith, whereas God uses the Word for that purpose as well as for regeneration and implanting faith in the first place. Doesn't baptizing children imply that you think they are, or will be, regenerate? No. We neither presume nor infer regeneration by baptism.

Could an infant child be regenerated? Yes—the Spirit blows where he wills (see John 3:8), and in Luke 1:41 John the Baptist shows signs of regeneration while he is in his mother's womb! God wills and works as he pleases—but we are not making any assertion about God's regenerating work in a child whom we baptize. The baptism of a covenant child recognizes that child's entrance into the visible church, but it makes no statement regarding his or her entrance into the invisible church.

Does infant baptism declare that you know what is happening in the heart of a child who is baptized? None of us know a person's heart, and we do not presume to know the baptized child's heart. Yet baptism does involve some level of presumption. As B. B. Warfield, a great nineteenth-century Reformed scholar, stated, "All baptism is inevitably administered on the basis not of knowledge but of presumption. And if we must baptize on presumption, the whole principle is yielded; and it would seem that we must baptize all whom we may fairly presume to be members of Christ's body." The baptistic view presumes upon the confession of an adult—that his or her confession is real and true. Covenantal baptism presumes not upon an individual's promise but on God's covenantal promises. As Warfield goes

on to say, "Assuredly a human profession is no more solid basis to build upon than a Divine promise. So soon, therefore, as it is fairly apprehended that we baptize on presumption and not on knowledge, it is inevitable that we shall baptize all those for whom we may, on any grounds, fairly cherish a good presumption that they belong to God's people—and this surely includes the infant children of believers."

Does baptizing our covenant children speak to our expectations or hope for them? Absolutely. The seventeenth-century Dutch theologian Johannes Cocceius' commentary on question 74 of the Heidelberg Catechism stated that baptism "signifies not merely that there is an external sanctity arising from their not being conceived and born like heathen children . . . but also that there is good reason to hope that they may really be sanctified from their tender years so that when they reach the years of understanding, they will through God's blessing upon the instructions of their parents discern and love the truth." By hearing the Word and being prayed for, these covenant children are continually being put in the way of God's grace, and so we expect and hope that they will believe. Our covenant children are truly privileged, among all the children in the world, and so we have great hope for them.

If baptism doesn't save, is there any comfort for Christian parents in the baptism of an infant who later dies? Although baptism doesn't save, its waters signify the promises of our covenant-keeping God—and his covenantal promises are for both us and our children. The kindness and graciousness that we see in our heavenly Father should give us confidence that our children who die in infancy are indeed with him. As Cocceius stated, "if they should die in infancy, then, as holy persons and members of Christ, they shall be saved. All this we believe on the ground of the promise given to Abraham, and through him to all believers, that Jehovah would be the God—that is, the sanctifier and the justifier—not of him only but also of his seed." David's story from 2 Samuel 12:15–23 reinforces the fact that we can have this confidence. The sin that David commits with Bathsheba incurs judgment from the Lord. Part of this judgment involves the sickness and eventual death of the infant child who is born to David from this illicit union. David spends seven days fasting and pleading with God for the life of his child. When his servants inform him, on the seventh day, that his child has died, he arises, washes, anoints himself, changes clothes, and goes to the house of the Lord to worship. His servants ask why he fasted and wept while the child was sick but then worshiped when he died. David's response is "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." David believes that he "shall go to" his child. If he simply means that he will die and be buried the way that his son has died and been buried, then there is no reason for joy or comfort. Rather, he arises in peace with the knowledge that he will be reunited with his son in glory. The baptism of a child, though it doesn't save, points to promises God has made that should comfort a parent's soul by bringing confidence and hope.

Are the sacraments necessary for salvation? No; they are not absolutely necessary for salvation—but God commands them, and so we are obliged to participate in them (even though they are more than an obligation; they are gifts God has given to us). If we neglect the sacraments, we experience spiritual deprivation—doing so has effects, just as persistently disobeying God in any respect will have effects on the spiritual life. We know, however, that the sacraments are not necessary for salvation. Berkhof, a Reformed systematic theologian, makes these points:

- From the free spiritual character of the gospel dispensation, in which God does not bind His grace to the use of certain external forms (Luke 18:14; John 4:21–23).
- From the fact that Scripture mentions only faith as the instrumental condition of salvation (John 3:36; 5:24; 6:29; Acts 16:31).
- From the fact that the sacraments do not originate faith but presuppose it, and are administered where faith is assumed (Acts 2:41; 16:14, 15, 30, 33; 1 Cor. 11:23–32)

- From the fact that many were actually saved without the use of the sacraments. Think of the believers before the time of Abraham and of the penitent thief on the cross.

If baptism itself does not save and isn't a requirement for salvation, why do Scripture passages such as Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; and 1 Peter 3:21 seem to say that it does and is? Verses such as these employ what theologians call sacramental language—language in which a sign can stand for the thing it is signifying. Genesis 17:10; Acts 22:16; and 1 Corinthians 5:7 all contain additional examples of this. In Genesis 17:10, God describes his covenant in terms of circumcision. In Acts 22:16, baptism is equated with the washing away of sins. And 1 Corinthians 5:7 calls Christ the Passover Lamb. Such a close relationship can exist between a sign and the thing it is signifying that, at times, the Scriptures will use them interchangeably.

My covenant children have not believed. Does this mean that I have failed? Or that the covenant promises of God have failed? Neither. Our adversary loves to sow the seeds of guilt and doubt—those are two of his greatest weapons. I have no doubt that you were not a perfect parent; no parents are. Nor did you model the faith perfectly; no parent has. But if you are a Christian parent, I'm confident that you pointed your children to Christ and taught them about him. So now you must rest upon his promises—and God provides great rest for Christian parents. He does not turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to his children—and you are his child. He is a covenant-keeping God, and we can pray for our children with confidence, because he works according to his covenant promises. So pray the promises of God for your children. They have heard the Word, their baptism calls out to them, "Believe, believe, believe," and they have been pointed to the faith by the example you have set through the years. Salvation is all of God and wholly his work, and baptism is a good reminder of this—one that we often need. So pray with confidence that he will make your children his children.

The only believers whom we see receiving baptism in the New Testament are adults. Doesn't it seem odd that, if infant baptism is allowable, none of the believers we see in the Gospels and in Acts had received covenantal baptism? We should expect to see adult baptisms in the Gospels—in fact, it would have been impossible for a covenantal baptism to have taken place during that time. Why? Because no individuals could have been born into a Christian home during the time of the Gospels. And we should expect to see the same thing in the book of Acts. We are witnessing the first generation of Christians within the Gospels and Acts, so of course these first converts received baptism upon making a profession of faith. As Geoffrey Bromily points out, "The first baptisms in the New Testament are parallel to the first circumcisions in the Old Testament." Furthermore, in the case of Lydia, her entire household is baptized when she comes to saving faith (see Acts 16:15). We cannot assert that children were definitely included in that instance of baptism; but Luke goes out of his way to make it clear that upon her profession of faith, her entire household was baptized. Fesko helpfully speaks to this issue when he says, "Baptists contend that a profession of faith is the administrative ground for baptism; only those who make a profession of faith receive the rite. They base this argument on what they see in the New Testament narratives that recount the baptisms of converts to the Christian faith. However, this argument rests on only half of the canon and fails once again to account for the doctrine of the covenant." Should covenant children, who have always been considered as being among the people of God, continue to receive the sacrament of initiation into his covenant people—or did something change regarding the status of these children as a result of the move from the old covenant to the new covenant? That is the central question for us to ask as we consider the entire Scriptures.

In Acts 2:38, when Peter is preaching during Pentecost, he commands his listeners, "Repent and be baptized." Infants cannot repent—so how can they be baptized? The word "and" in this verse functions as a coordinating conjunction, not a causal conjunction. That is to say, the "repent[ing]" does not cause the "be[ing]

baptized." Neither does the word indicate a logical order for these commands—as if a person who has first repented should then be baptized. Rather, these are two equally important commands. Note, as well, that the conjunction "for" at the beginning of the following verse links it with this one—verse 38 cannot be understood apart from verse 39. The fact that "the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself " provides the grounds for the commands to "repent" and "be baptized" that we see in verse 38. It is those who receive God's promises who are to be baptized—and in verse 39 Peter includes covenant children within that number.

It has been stated that baptism is a sign and a seal of the saving work Christ has done to fulfill the covenant of grace. Since it is a seal, shouldn't a person receive baptism after already having faith? The promises that baptism represents, signifies, and seals are not tied to the moment when baptism is administered. Upon receiving the sacrament in infancy or childhood, an individual may see these promises realized in his or her life at eight days old, eight years old, or eighty-eight years old. Furthermore, as chapter 1 discussed, baptism serves primarily as a seal not of a person's subjective faith but of God's faithfulness. What it principally seals is God's promises, not our own.

If baptism means "to immerse," isn't that an argument against baptizing infants? The Eastern Orthodox Church has historically baptized infants by immersion. In fact, historical records testify that they were baptizing infants by a triple immersion as early as the eighth century. Therefore, we want to be careful about making the assertion that any particular mode of baptism (e.g., immersion) rules out any particular subjects of the baptism (e.g., infants).

Does the word for baptism in the New Testament always mean "to immerse"? The word that the New Testament uses for baptism—baptizo, in its various forms—can mean "to immerse," but that isn't necessarily how it should always be defined. If indeed baptism requires that immersion be performed, then we would expect the word that the Bible uses for baptism to always mean to immerse—and yet that is far from the case. It is used various ways in the New Testament, and in writings outside the New Testament as well. For example, the author of Hebrews mentions the various "washings" (baptismois) that were performed in the Old Testament (Heb. 9:10). These washings included "the sprinkling of defiled persons" (v. 13) and the account of when Moses "took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people" (v. 19). The chapter goes on to detail one more of these "washings": the time when blood was "sprinkled [on] both the tent and all the vessels used in worship" (v. 21). The writer of Hebrews considers these to be examples of the same kind of "washings" that the word for baptism indicates—and they are all instances of something being sprinkled. In Mark 7, Jesus's disciples are criticized for not washing their hands before they eat. We are informed in verse 3 that the Pharisees and the Jews did not eat unless they would "baptisontai." In verse 4, Mark relays other rules that the Pharisees observed, including the "washings" (baptismous) of dining couches. And the Pharisees here are clearly not immersing themselves or their dining couches. In 1 Corinthians 10:2, Paul, after referencing the crossing of the Red Sea, says that "all were baptized [ebaptisanto] into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." The point of this passage is consecration. No one would contend that the Israelites were "immersed" in the sea—the Egyptians were! The Israelites were, at best, sprinkled by it. Luke 11:38 will suffice as our final example of how this word is used. Luke comments that a Pharisee "was astonished to see that [Jesus] did not first wash before dinner." The word that is translated "wash" here is again a form of baptizo. Clearly what astonished this Pharisee was not that Christ didn't immerse himself before eating. There are clearly times when the writers of the New Testament use this term to refer to a mode other than immersion. Therefore, it cannot be contended that baptizo indicates that baptism must be by immersion, because the word doesn't always mean to immerse; it contains a range of meanings. So while the argument can be made that immersion is a valid form of baptism, it is not the required form.

Is immersion allowable? Yes. Immersion serves as a fine mode of baptism. The mode of baptizing itself is not essential—though most people in the history of Reformed theology have argued that pouring or sprinkling better signifies the meaning and purpose of baptism.

Why baptize by pouring or sprinkling? If any baptism that occurs in the New Testament proves important as a precedent for pouring or sprinkling, surely it is the baptism at Pentecost described in Acts 2. This is the baptism that Joel prophesied (see Joel 2:28–29), that John pointed to (see Matt. 3:11–12), and that Christ promised would come (see Acts 1:5; 11:16)—both John and Jesus outright calling it a baptism as they did so. And what occurs during that baptism? The Spirit is poured out. Since baptism signifies that pouring out of the Spirit, a pouring or sprinkling of the water does this most accurately. Presbyterians also sprinkle because baptism signifies the fact that we have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. On the great Day of Atonement each year, the high priest would sprinkle the blood from Israel's sin offerings onto the mercy seat (see Lev. 16:14–15). This provided atonement for the people of God—and also pointed forward to the atoning work that Christ would perform as the Lamb of God. Baptism now points back to this atoning work, and sprinkling provides a strong visual of this.

But what about the references we see in the New Testament to baptized individuals going "into" the water? Doesn't that prove that baptism is done through immersion? The Greek preposition that we're talking about here—eis—has a range of meanings. It surely can mean "into," but it can also mean "to," "toward," "unto," "for," and "among." For example, this one preposition occurs eleven times throughout Acts 8—and English Bibles translate those eleven occurrences in various ways. In the ESV we find the word translated as "to" seven times (vv. 3, 5, 20, 25, 26, 27, 40), "at" one time (v. 40), "in" twice (vv. 16, 23), and "into" (v. 38) only once. The way that both this word and baptizo are invoked indicate how, more often than not, the argument for baptism by immersion tends to employ circular reasoning. When the word for baptism is examined, we are often told that it means "to immerse" because the circumstances in which the Bible uses it make it clear that this is what is occurring. But when this circumstantial evidence is examined, and it is demonstrated that there is no proof that people are described as going "into" the water (as is argued from the use of this preposition as well), then it is maintained that this must have occurred because that is what baptizo means.

Doesn't the case of the Ethiopian eunuch point to baptism by immersion? There is no evidence to support such a conclusion—in fact, the circumstantial evidence points in the opposite direction. The Ethiopian eunuch is said to be traveling in a "desert place" (Acts 8:26). The place the account is describing is the barren region of the Negev, south of Judea. Finding enough water there to immerse someone seems unlikely at best. When the eunuch and Philip come to water, the eunuch cries out to be baptized. It is safe to assume that Philip has explained baptism to him by this point—but from where has the eunuch drawn the conclusion that he should be baptized in the first place? The eunuch was reading from the book of Isaiah when Philip found him, and he had been reading for a period of time—long enough to wrestle with the text. In the vicinity of the passage that we know he was reading (see Acts 8:32–33), we find the line "So shall he sprinkle many nations" (Isa. 52:15). This is the only reference to water in the surrounding text from Isaiah. The fact that the text says they then went "into" and "out of " the water does not imply immersion. As John Murray says, It should be noted that Philip as well as the eunuch went down into the water and came up out of the water. If such expressions imply or prove immersion, then they mean that Philip immersed himself as well as the eunuch. . . . The expressions, "they both went down into the water" and "they came up out of the water" are satisfied by the thought that they both went down to the water, stood on the brink or stepped into the edge, and that Philip baptised the eunuch by scooping up the water and pouring it or sprinkling it on him. Could Philip have

immersed him? Yes; but the text neither demands nor proves that contention. We don't know the actual mode of baptism that Philip employed here, so this text does not support a baptistic argument.

What about the baptism Paul receives in Acts? The account of Paul's baptism also hints that immersion did not take place. He is in the house of Judas when God sends Ananias to him, and in Acts 9:17 we are told that Ananias "entered the house." After he informs Paul that has God sent him, we read, "And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened" (vv. 18–19). In both of the accounts we are given of this event—Acts 9 as well as Acts 22—the narrative moves quickly; it appears that Paul simply rises and receives baptism. The most straightforward reading of these texts implies that he does not leave the home; and it is doubtful, at the very least, that a house possessed the means for him to be immersed. Therefore, even the apostle Paul's own baptism account suggests that he was baptized via sprinkling or pouring rather than by immersion.

What about the Philippian jailer's baptism? The baptism that Paul and Silas performed on the Philippian jailer and his household occurred after the two apostles had been scourged and beaten by their captors. It would have been a difficult task for these two wearied evangelists, after surviving such a night, to have then baptized an entire family by immersion. Since the jail would not have contained sufficient water for baptism by immersion, baptizing this family between midnight and sunrise would have required the herculean task of departing the jail, winding their way down to a riverside in the dark, and there immersing an entire family. And all this after they had received a severe beating! The more likely sequence of events is that, after the Philippian jailer "brought them out" (Acts 16:30) from the "inner prison" (v. 24), he and his family received baptism in the larger portion of the jail—which also contained his house (see v. 34)—by way of sprinkling or pouring. Further evidence for this view presents itself when we consider how Paul refused to exit the jail, once the magistrates ordered him and Silas to leave, and required the magistrates to come and lead them out instead (see v. 37). Would they have left the jail in the middle of the night, without the consent of the magistrates, only for Paul to require them to come in and let him and Silas go after they did have the magistrates' consent? It would have undermined his entire position and argument if he had done so.

But wasn't the "baptism" of the Spirit a type of immersion, since Acts2:2 says that "it filled the entire house"? This account from Acts doesn't say that the Spirit"filled the entire house." The Spirit is first mentioned after this has happened, in verses 3 and 4. The closest antecedent to the "it" that verse 2 says filled the house is the "sound" that this phrase is actually referring to: "And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting." It's only afterward that we read about the way in which the Spirit descended on the apostles: "Divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them" (Acts 2:3). No doubt this "sound" is tied to the Spirit, but it is the "sound" itself, not the Spirit, that fills the house.

In Romans 6, Paul says we were "buried" with Christ through baptism and then "raised" with him. Doesn't immersion best symbolize that process? Romans 6 is not about the mode of baptism; rather, it is addressing our identification with Christ. This passage is better understood as referring not to water baptism but rather to the fact that our identity changes as we are "immersed" in Christ. The term used for "baptism" in the New Testament world denoted some sort of change taking place. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, used it of crowds that flooded (or baptized) Jerusalem and "wrecked the city." Jesus uses the term to indicate a transformation when he speaks of his death as a baptism in Mark 10:38 and Luke 12:50. Paul employs it to denote the same thing. Two examples will suffice to demonstrate this. In 1 Corinthians 10:2, he recalls how the Israelites "were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea"—referring to the Red Sea crossing. Yet when the Israelites made that crossing, they were not immersed in water but rather joined to Moses and identified with him on the basis of not being able to return to Egypt. And Paul

uses the term again in Galatians 3:27, in which he makes the point that being baptized into Christ means being united with him. Furthermore, the perception that immersion symbolizes our dying and rising with Christ springs more from our Western practice of burial than from Christ's actual burial. He was not buried in the ground; he was buried in a cave in the side of a hill. His rising was not so much a case of "Up from the grave he arose" as "Out from the grave he arose."

Is covenantal baptism a holdover of Roman Catholicism? Covenantal baptism does not present the sacraments as possessing power in and of themselves, the way the Roman Catholic Church teaches. Roman Catholicism teaches that the sacraments, including baptism, are effective ex opere operato ("from the work performed")—in other words, that there is an efficacy in the doing that makes them necessary for regeneration. The Reformed tradition rejects such a view; it maintains, rather, that the sacraments have power and are efficacious (i.e., effective) only through the Holy Spirit and according to his working as they are embraced solely by faith. In a quote that was referenced earlier in the book, Calvin nicely illustrates why we need to have faith when we receive the sacraments: "They avail and profit nothing unless received in faith. As with wine or oil or some other liquid, no matter how much you pour out, it will flow away and disappear unless the mouth of the vessel to receive it is open; moreover, the vessel will be splashed over on the outside, but will still remain void and empty."

Does the act of baptism make children into members of the church? Covenant children receive baptism as a sign that they are already counted as members of the visible church. They enter into the covenant community upon conception, and thus they are entitled to receive the sign of entrance into that community as soon as they are able to. Baptism does not cause this membership but rather signifies it.

How old is too old for a covenant child to be baptized? At what age should a profession of faith be required before a person is baptized? Leaders in different churches may come to different conclusions regarding this question, and it is best answered by your local elders. However, a good principle to bring to bear is that as long as a child is not yet considered to be a young adult, he or she may rightly receive baptism as a covenantal child. If a child shows resistance to being baptized and is of a sufficient age to articulate a lack of belief, then he or she should not be baptized.

Is there an age of accountability? The idea of an age of accountability arose during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries among Protestants from an Arminian tradition who were trying to explain what happens to children who die in infancy. The Arminian view has no covenantal promises to offer to covenant children. Therefore, to alleviate the grief of covenant children being relegated to hell in their theological system, these Arminians developed the idea of the age of accountability. But no such notion can be found in the Scriptures—we see that we are all held accountable from the time of our conception. Clearly we each reach an age when we begin to comprehend the faith in a more mature way; but this will develop differently across different children, and thus establishing an arbitrary age makes little sense. Some children will understand the faith earlier than others, and all need to hear the free offer of the gospel regardless of their age. Therefore, we ought to appeal to our children, from their earliest days, to believe and embrace the covenant promises that have been made to them.

Why are children baptized into the visible church when they may prove to be unregenerate? Doesn't Jeremiah 31:31–34 make it clear that all God's people will know him? And thus, isn't the church no longer a mixed community of the regenerate and the unregenerate, as it was under the old covenant? The promises regarding the new covenant that are found in this passage have, as is true of much of the new covenant, been inaugurated but not yet consummated. They fall under the theological category that is commonly recognized as

"already but not yet." All Christians recognize that this dynamic exists in the present, because all of us still evangelize. None of us believe that we currently exist in a state in which "no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Jer. 31:34). We still await the return of Christ so that this will be fully consummated. Some Christians, however, still argue that the new covenant differs from the old covenant in that the new covenant community is a regenerate community. In contrast, Reformed theology distinguishes between the visible and the invisible church. There are some members of the visible church (the community that professes belief in the Lord Jesus Christ) who will prove not to be members of the invisible church (the community of all true believers of all ages and in all places). Not all who are baptized into the visible church—whether as adults or as children—will necessarily be saved. The church isn't a fully regenerate community. For some people, baptism will be—as was circumcision in the Old Testament—a sign of judgment. As Fesko points out, the contrast that we witness in Jeremiah 31:31–34 "is not between the new covenant and the Abrahamic covenant, but between the new and old covenant (the Mosaic covenant). Verse 32 clearly states that the new covenant would not be like the covenant that God made with the fathers when He brought them out of Egypt." Furthermore, even in this text, God makes the promise with covenant children in view (see Jer. 32:38–41), which continues the idea of the Abrahamic Covenant. As Fesko asserts, "This means that the new covenant is organically connected to the Abrahamic covenant and that the Mosaic covenant expires." The new covenant community remains, in this present age, a mixed community of regenerate and unregenerate individuals. One day the invisible church will be revealed, and in it there will be no mixture—but until that happens, at the return of Christ, the visible church will always be mixed.

Isn't it sufficient to say that children can be baptized? Do we need to say they *should* be baptized? If God considers children to be members of the covenant community, then neglecting covenantal baptism means we are keeping one of the chief means of God's grace from our covenant children's lives. This would be a serious error.

Should people who were baptized in the Roman Catholic Church be baptized again?
To be fair, the answer to this question has not been uniform throughout Reformed church history. Yet most of the Reformed tradition has understood Roman Catholic baptism to be a legitimate type of baptism (though there was a significant portion of the American Presbyterian church, before the American Civil War, that argued otherwise). Most of the magisterial Reformers (e.g., Luther, Zwingli, Melanchthon, and so on) were baptized within the Roman church, so this was not a small issue. And as they acknowledged, and as we must remember, there is only one baptism (see Eph. 4:5). And the efficacy of that baptism is not tied to the person who administers it. Rather, a baptism that is administered with water, in the name of the Trinity, and with the intent of signifying Christ and his benefits is a valid baptism. Charles Hodge, who argued strongly on the side of the validity of Roman baptism, stated, "The error of the Romanists concerning the absolute necessity and uniform efficacy (in the case of infants) of baptism, is very great, but it cannot invalidate the nature of the ordinance."

What if I was "baptized" in a Mormon, Jesus-Only Pentecostal, or Jehovah's Witness church? You should approach the elders and pastor of the church you attend and ask to be baptized. Baptisms that are performed in any of these contexts are done so outside the sphere of Christian baptism. These traditions deny the basic tenets of Christianity, as detailed by the historic creeds of the church, and thus lie outside the bounds of the Christian faith.

Is it wrong to be baptized again, as a believer, if someone was baptized as an infant? What if I simply want to make a public profession of my faith? Yes, it is wrong—because there is only one baptism (see Eph. 4:5). We call the purpose of baptism into question when we receive it more than once. Baptism is based not upon the individual but upon the working of the Spirit and the covenant promises God has made to us in Christ Jesus. Being "baptized again"

is an impossibility. A desire to make a public profession of faith is commendable. However, becoming a communing member of the church, attending corporate worship weekly, and living one's life as a "living sacrifice" unto God constitutes a public profession on its own (Rom. 12:1; see also v. 2).

Should we allow anyone to administer baptism? The sacraments, by their very nature, serve as a visible sign of what is proclaimed in the Word of God. The Word governs the sacraments, and therefore it would be improper to observe them in a context in which the Word is not preached. Paul asserts that ministers are "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1)—and thus, since the administration of the sacraments has, for most of Reformed church history, been understood as an extension of the preached Word, it has been reserved for teaching elders or pastors alone.

What if I was baptized by a non-pastor, such as a fellow teenager, my father, my mother, an aunt, a camp counselor, or a university campus ministry worker? Though the previous answer stands, the efficacy of baptism does not depend on the one who is administering it. As the Westminster Larger Catechism says, "The sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not by any power in themselves, or any virtue derived from the piety or intention of him by whom they are administered, but only by the working of the Holy Ghost, and the blessing of Christ, by whom they are instituted." Even if it is not administered by an ordained pastor, a baptism that is administered with water in the triune name of God can be a true baptism. Let us, however, remind ourselves that baptism serves as a sign of an individual's entrance into the visible church. The sacraments are not simply individualistic acts of private piety; baptism was given to the visible church and is therefore tied to one's connection with a particular local body of believers. Therefore it would prove irregular to receive baptism separately from a local church body and an ordained minister of the gospel. Irregular, however, does not equal invalid—and in fact necessity may dictate irregularity (e.g., in a missions context somewhere that local churches may not be established, in a place where the church is persecuted, and so on). But irregularity should be avoided if possible.

What if the person who baptized me later denied the faith? Again, the efficacy of baptism is not tied to the person who administers it. It would be an awful thing if that were true—we would need to maintain a watchful eye, for the rest of our days, on the person who administered our baptism, and doubt would always remain about whether our baptism would prove, in the end, to be a true baptism. But this is not the case. The Spirit's working and Christ's blessing, according to the covenant promises of God the Father, make baptism effectual. It is dependent on him—not someone else.

Should I leave a church that practices baptism differently from the way I believe? Not necessarily. When congregants of the church that I serve are moving to a new area, I tell them, "Find a Bible-believing church that preaches the Word faithfully and where elders shepherd the flock and you can serve." If you belong to a church like this, thank God. It is a good and rare church—don't dismiss the great by instead seeking the ideal. You should seriously weigh the option of staying and serving, without being combative over this doctrine, if you are able. It may, however, be necessary or even beneficial for you (and for that church) to instead find a church that practices baptism in a way that is closer to your convictions about it. This decision should be made with the counsel of your current pastor and elders. If you have taken vows of membership at that church, your loyalty lies there until the Lord makes it clear that you should move on. And if you do so, I pray it is with tears and not a haughty spirit.

I am convinced about covenantal baptism, but I am a member of a baptistic church, and my children can't receive the sacrament here. Is this a reason to leave? Probably; but again, I would weigh this decision heavily. Your children are not somehow "lesser" covenant children if they are raised in a baptistic church. Though my baptistic friends don't realize that all the children in their churches are members of the covenant community, their personal

conviction doesn't nullify the fact that this is indeed true. Your children are still covenant children, even though they are missing some of the blessings of inclusion in that covenant. I would pray, talk with advisors, and consult with your current pastor(s) and elders. It may be that you will indeed have to move your membership—but you will want to do so with conviction (and a measure of sorrow).

If I have family members who don't believe in covenantal baptism, should I invite them to the service in which our child is baptized? Absolutely. Invite them, with the knowledge that they will view the service differently. I married into a wonderfully strong baptistic family. When I baptized my daughter, we invited all my in-laws to attend. The entire weekend was filled with comments like "I'm looking forward to the baby dedication"; "What a nice baby dedication"; "Congratulations on dedicating your baby." It was fine, and we were blessed to have them there. I was happy for them to witness a covenantal baptism and to hear it explained—especially since I was the one performing and explaining it!

Should I marry someone with whom I disagree regarding baptism? I encourage couples to sort through this issue before marriage. It seldom becomes easier for them to do so later, and when they conceive their first child, the pressure surrounding this issue heightens—which raises the bar of stress in a young marriage. Can it work? Of course. Can it be sorted out later? Yes. But is it better to agree before vows are exchanged? Absolutely.

My spouse and I disagree on whether to baptize our children. What should we do? First, be patient and gracious with each other. Spend concerted times of prayer and study together. I would suggest reading some of the recommended resources at the end of this book. Choose one or two of them to read together. Then find a book that cogently presents a baptistic view and read it together. Search the Scriptures. Trust each other enough to actually engage in dialogue about this, ask each other questions, and share your concerns. I would take time to go through this process. But in the event that you spend a lot of time and energy doing so without reaching an agreement, I would encourage the husband to seek counsel from his pastor and elders. He will then need to make a decision about it—hopefully after hearing the counsel and receiving the support of his wife.

Must a person be baptized before being admitted to the Lord's Table? Yes—baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the covenant people of God. This is why it occurs once and why it occurs before communion can be taken. Meanwhile, the Lord's Table is observed regularly throughout the course of a Christian's life instead of simply once. It serves as the sacrament of spiritual nourishment and is to be taken primarily with the local body to which a Christian has committed himself or herself by taking its membership vows.

I attend a baptistic church, and they want me to be "rebaptized" before I can come to the Table. Should I do so? If you are convinced of the truth that the baptism you received as an infant or a child was a true baptism, then you should not participate in what they are requiring. It would go against your conscience to participate in it—and it is not good to go against one's conscience. This most likely means that you will need to begin searching for a new church. Not being a member of the church you attend or being able to come to the Table with your brothers and sisters in Christ can be endured for a season, but doing so is deleterious over a long period of time.

Do you have to believe in covenantal baptism in order to serve as an officer in a Reformed or Presbyterian church? Most Reformed or Presbyterian churches require their officers to hold to a covenantal view of baptism. This is because churches in this tradition usually require their officers to subscribe to confessional standards (e.g., the Westminster Standards, Three Forms of Unity, and so on). This requirement helps to safeguard the teaching, unity, and faithfulness of the church. A person's view on covenantal baptism affects many different areas of that person's

doctrine, and not subscribing to it would also mean not subscribing to most Reformed or Presbyterian confessions. This does not, however, mean that an individual with baptistic convictions cannot occupy other leadership positions in such a church. Some of the most servant-hearted leaders in different areas of the church that I serve hold baptistic convictions, and they are well respected; our church would suffer without them. They just can't be officers.

Is baptism made too much of in the church today? There seems to be a lot of disagreement and division over who receives it and how it is performed. Is it worth all this? It is certainly possible to make too much of baptism—but we also risk making too little of it. The discussions about it are worth having—but always in love. Truth matters, and so we honor the Lord when we attempt to ascertain and maintain what the Scriptures teach. There is a loving and gracious way of doing this, however. I for one am always happy—well, usually happy—when people want to discuss baptism. It affords me the opportunity to discuss the kindness of our covenant-keeping, sinner-saving, truth-defining, sovereign God. That is a good thing. And we can have these discussions well, and to the glory of the Father, by abiding in the grace of Christ and the fellowship of the Spirit.