

LD 27; Acts 2:37-41; Acts 16:25-34; Covenantal Baptism I. The Promise of Baptism Extended II. The Limits of Baptism Identified

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who should receive the sign of baptism? What kind of baptism do we practice in this church? Usually, we categorize churches into two groups- either you only baptize babies or you only baptize people who are believers. But today I am going to submit to you a 3<sup>rd</sup> option- the one that we practice. The third option is this- our church practices covenantal or household baptism. What can happen in Reformed churches is that since we normally witness baptism being administered to little children we start to think that little children are the only ones we baptize. But do you know that we actually have a form for household baptism in our Forms and Prayers book? So the issue before us is this- who should receive the sign of baptism? To answer that question, we have to consider who exactly are those who are called the people of God. Who does God covenant with? As we will see, the covenant of God is established with believers and their children. So why do we baptize our children? Do we baptize then out of custom or superstition- hoping for the best? Of is there both a Scriptural example and basis for this practice? Let me ask you, children, are you a member of this church? Do our grade school kids belong to this church? Do they belong to Jesus Christ? Having considered the Means of Grace last week, we press on to focus on the sacraments. This week as we look at Baptism we are going to see both its proper use and the limits of its use. We look at this theme: Jesus Christ instituted household baptism as a sign to those in covenant with Him.

### **I. The Promise of Baptism Extended**

We start by considering the promise of baptism and to whom that promise is extended. Who receives the promises? To whom does God speak when He promises the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit? Well, that promise is made to believers and their children. To prove this point, consider our reading from Acts 16:31- when the Philippian jailer took Paul into his home, Paul states, that if you believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household. So the promise of salvation is

spoken in the context of the household. Okay- we are good so far. The promise of the covenant which is the promise of salvation by Jesus is a promise spoken to an entire household. But who then receives the sign of the covenant? Well, the very ones that receive the promise of the covenant are the same ones that receive the sign of the covenant. Where do we see this? Well, look at Acts 16:33- the Philippian jailer was baptized at once- along with all his family. Did you catch that? Well, lets go back to Acts 16:15- here with Lydia. After Lydia's heart was opened by the Holy Spirit, both she and her whole household were baptized! So do not miss this point, although the heads of the household are the ones who become believers- their whole family enjoys the benefit of the promise and the sign. So when both Lydia and the Philippian jailer become Christians and are grafted into the Covenant of Grace- their whole household or their whole family received the sign of that covenant along with them. So we need to be clear here when we speak about baptism within the NT church. Baptism is not just for adult believers- nor is baptism only for the children either. We do not baptize babies in our church as a sacrament used in isolation. No, it is the children of believers who are baptized along with their believing parents! In other words, if the parents were not believers who had been baptized their children would not receive the sign either. That is why it would be more correct to say that our church practices household or covenantal baptism instead of simply saying that practice infant baptism. This point is illustrated when a new family becomes a Christian family. After the parents profess their faith, both they and their children would be baptized. So, getting back to the question of QA 74- who should be baptized? Believing adults along with their children. Christian adults along with the children that God grants to them. As I asked the children in the introduction, are you a member of this church? Who are the people of God? Who are rightly considered as members of this church? If you can call yourself a member of this church, then the sign of baptism should be applied to you. And who are members of this church? Well, believers along with their children are members of this church.

Now that we have considered the extent of baptism as illustrated in Acts 16, let's move on to consider what is the promise connected to this sacrament. As QA 74 explains, those who are baptized receive the promise of deliverance from sin through Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit who works faith. So we can answer our question another way- if we look at who is promised forgiveness and who is promised the Holy Spirit, then we can know who it is that should be baptized. Well, earlier we read in Acts 16:31, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household. So the promise of salvation is promised to the household of those who believe. We find the same thing back in Acts 2:38- repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is the promise- but to whom is this promise spoken? Well, as Acts 2:39 answers, this promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself. So we hear the same thing again- the promise is for you and for your children. If the promise is for believers and their children, it stands that the sign of the promise which is baptism is for these as well. But do not miss the extension beyond believers and their children. This promise is for all who are far off- everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself. In other words, God is not bound to do His work only within our church and within the hearts of our children. We can be very thankful for that promise given to us and our little ones- but do not miss the fact that God is doing great work out there as well! Baptism is a fitting sign for all whom our God gathers- and God is not a respecter of men! So our neighbors, other churches and people in other countries enjoy this promise along with the sign as well! Baptism is a sign given to us from God- it is a statement- this one belongs to God! This one has been marked- this one has been brought near- to this one I make my promise- forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit belong to you. By this sign, God's people are distinguished and set apart from the world. So to bring our first point to a close, I want to remind our children here of this fact; this church is your church! By being baptized God has set you apart for Himself! You belong here- your place is here with God's people! This is not just your parent's church- it

is your church! He is making you a disciple- here! But as we also heard a few weeks back, those who receive the sign of baptism must improve upon that sign. Those who hear the promises of God must accept and believe those promises as well! As we read in Acts 2, repent and be baptized. Or again in Acts 16, believe in the Lord Jesus and your will be saved. Receiving the sign does not replace the need for faith and repentance- as we now see in our second point- there are limits to baptism as well.

## **II. The Limits of Baptism Identified**

So lets move into our second point, the limits of baptism identified. As QA 72 makes clear, baptism alone and the external washing by itself does not save! As we found in Acts 2 and Acts 16, there is a call to faith- to repent and believe- that must be heard as well! So there is a distinction that must be upheld. The external water of baptism remains a sign and a seal, but the water does not replace or secure that which is signified. It is sort of like the way that use paper money in the US. Those little pieces of green paper mean nothing without the good faith and credit of the US government. So also, baptism by itself without faith in the crucified savior does us little lasting good. In other words, the water of baptism cannot be a used in the place of Christ's blood- for it is Christ's blood alone that washes away sins. To prove this fact, we can simply look at examples in the Bible where people were a part of the external people of God without having the internal washing and benefit. In the OT, circumcision was the sign administered to the people of God- specifically the males. Now we know that Ishmael was circumcised when he was about 13 years old, and his brother Isaac was circumcised when he was but 8 days old. But only through Isaac would the blessing of the covenant be extended. We will see the same thing tonight with Jacob and Esau. Both sons received the sign of the covenant- both being circumcised- but one would be loved while the other hated. Or from the NT, consider that Ananias and Saphira were members of the NT church- and so was Simon Magus. But being a member of the church is no replacement for having true faith and repentance! As Acts 5:4 says- wickedness still dwelled in their hearts. So being externally baptized- being a baptized member of the local congregation is no substitute

for having a true and living faith! As we read from QA 72- the water of baptism does not save- does not wash away sins by itself. If that were true- if simply getting a person baptized meant that they were truly saved, then we should go around baptizing as many people as possible! There would be no need for church discipline and little use in making disciples! So the point is very clear- only Jesus' blood and Holy Spirit can cleanse us from sin. As I John 1:7 puts it, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from sin. The application of this point should be clear- even though Baptism is a great blessing; we should not put our trust in the fact that we are baptized! To say this another way, being a member of the local church is no substitute for having true faith! Remember, it is not your external but your internal washing that saves you! As I Peter 3:21 puts it, this baptism saves you, not as a removal of dirt from your body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Being baptized is a gift- it is a privilege to belong to church of Jesu Christ! You are raised in the context of the preaching- you see the sacraments put on display before your very eyes. But the whole point of these means is to produce faith in Jesus Christ within you! So don't trust in the means themselves- but rather trust in the Savior who has given us these means!

As we close, our consideration of Baptism is one that should produce both humility and thanksgiving. Humility because we are dirty and need to be cleaned- sinful and we need to be washed by the blood of Christ! And thanksgiving- the very washing that is necessary has been both signified and supplied for us! Jesus Christ instituted household baptism as a sign to those in covenant with Him. Since God has covenanted with us and our children, let us embrace our Savior who has washed us with His blood!