

KEEPING BAPTISM CENTRAL:
HOW BAPTISM TRANSFORMS OUR DAILY LIVES

When a person asks, “How can I live the Christian life? How can I have strength to obey God’s law?” the answer is the same: “The gospel must become paramount in your life. The gospel is just as important for believers as it is for unbelievers. You must learn how to preach the gospel to yourself every day.”¹ Inevitably then arise questions, such as “What do you mean one must preach the gospel to himself?” “How do you do this?” “What does that look like?” “Isn’t the gospel what we preach to unbelievers to get them saved?” “How many times do you need to be told to receive Jesus?”

Regrettably, such a diminished understanding of the gospel is common. Initially, it may seem strange to some that the gospel is to be preached even to believers. Yet, in Romans 1:15, Paul says he was eager to preach the gospel to believers because his aim was to bring about the obedience of faith among the gentiles (Rom. 1:5; cf. 16:26). Authentic saving faith and genuine obedience come about through the gospel. In his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, Zacharias Ursinus asks, “What are the proper effects of the Gospel?” He then responds:

The proper effects of the gospel are—

1. Faith; because “faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God.” “The Gospel is the ministration of the Spirit.” “The power of God unto salvation.” (Rom. 10:17. 2 Cor. 3:8. Rom. 1:16.)

2. Through faith, our entire conversion to God, justification, regeneration [i.e., sanctification] and salvation; for through faith we receive Christ, with all his benefits.²

1. I first became acquainted with the phrase “preach the gospel to yourself” from Jerry Bridges’ works. For example, see Jerry Bridges, *The Gospel for Real Life: Turn to the Liberating Power of the Cross . . . Every Day* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 9.

2. Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (n.d.; repr. of 1852 ed., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, n.d.), 105.

The believer's faith begins with the gospel and is sustained and strengthened by this same good news of grace again and again. Therefore, the believer must learn to make the gospel paramount in his life. The question is how? What does "to make the gospel paramount" look like? At this point the sacraments³ come to play a central role in the believer's daily walk. They serve as gracious aids to one's faith because they are centrally related to the gospel.⁴

Question 65 of *The Heidelberg Catechism* asks, "Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits, where does this faith come from? A. From the Holy Spirit . . . who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel . . . and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments."⁵

Because the sacraments play such a crucial role in the believer's walk, it is important to define what they are.⁶ Again, the Heidelberg Catechism is helpful. Question 66 asks, "What are the sacraments?" Here is the response: "The sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals. They were instituted by God so that by their use He might the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel. . . . And this is the promise: that God graciously

3. The English word *sacrament* comes from the Latin word *sacramentum* (oath). Latin-speaking Christians used this term to translate the Greek word *mysterion* (mystery).

4. With the recognition that significant differences exist between paedo- and credobaptists, the intent of this paper is to emphasize the benefits of baptism, which both positions agree on. For an excellent discussion of the benefits of baptism, see D. Marion Clark, "Baptism: Joyful Sign of the Gospel," in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W.H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2003), 170-92.

5. Westminster Theological Seminary, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, <http://www.wts.edu/resources/heidelberg.html> (accessed March 22, 2010).

6. Concerning the number of sacraments, Article 33 of the Belgic Confession states, "We are satisfied with the number of sacraments that Christ our Master has ordained for us. There are only two: the sacrament of baptism and the Holy Supper of Jesus Christ," <http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/BelgicConfession> (accessed March 24, 2010).

grants us forgiveness of sins and everlasting life because of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross.”⁷

This is good news! D. Marion Clark writes, “Baptism is a neon light flashing ‘Gospel, Gospel, Gospel.’”⁸ God not only announces good news to us through the preaching of the gospel but also attaches visible signs, which confirm His favor toward us in order to sustain and strengthen the weakness of our faith.⁹ John Calvin writes, “We have determined, therefore, that sacraments are truly named the testimonies of God’s grace and are like seals of the good will that he feels toward us, which by attesting that good will to us, sustain, nourish, confirm, and increase our faith.”¹⁰ Baptism is, therefore, a visible gospel.

Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 1:20 that all the promises of God find their yes in Christ. As a seal, a sacrament confirms this “yes.” Baptism says, “Yes! God’s promises, which are announced to you in the gospel, really are true for you!” Christ instituted the sacraments so that the Christian may see and understand more clearly and feel and experience more dearly the promises of the gospel. Herman Witsius writes, “What believers see with their eyes, usually sink deeper into the soul, and leave deeper impressions of themselves, than those only which they hear with their ears.”¹¹ The aim of the sacraments,

7. Westminster Theological Seminary, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, question 66.

8. Clark, “Baptism: Joyful Sign of the Gospel,” 171.

9. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 21 of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1278.

10. *Ibid.*, 1282.

11. Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity* (1677; repr., Kingsburg, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), 1:105.

then, is to continually drive the gospel deeper and deeper into our hearts to assure the believer and empower him to grow in sanctification.¹²

Therefore, the sacraments, which are to be joined to God's promises,¹³ are necessary and indispensable for living the Christian life. They focus the believer's faith like a laser beam on the finished work of Christ as the only ground of salvation. Without assurance of acceptance with God, the believer cannot progress in sanctification. Walter Marshall writes,

You will never receive any spiritual life that can free you from this dominion of sin unless this guilt and curse of sin is removed from you. This, of course, is what happens when God justifies you—the guilt and curse of sin are removed from you (Galatians 3:13-14; Romans 6:14). You know that as long as you see yourself still under the curse and wrath of God, you can have nothing but despair. You will never be able to live to God in holiness. . . . The nature of true obedience to the law absolutely requires you to understand that you are reconciled to God, loved by him, and under his favor, if you really are going to obey the law.¹⁴

Baptism is a guarantee that the guilt and curse of sin are removed from the believer. It assures the Christian of the righteousness he has through faith in Christ alone. It guarantees the believer that he is reconciled to God, loved by him and under His favor, thereby freeing the believer to truly obey God's law (Matt. 22:37-40; Gal. 5:23).

Given that the sacraments are a visible gospel, keeping baptism central in one's daily life is equivalent to keeping the gospel central.¹⁵ Yet, if the average Evangelical¹⁶ were asked

12. This is what is meant by the term "gospel-driven."

13. John Calvin writes, "A sacrament is never without a preceding promise but is joined to it as a sort of appendix, with the purpose of confirming and sealing the promise itself" (*Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 21:1278).

14. Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification: Growing in Holiness by Living in Union with Christ*, put into modern English by Bruce H. McRae (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 30-31.

15. There is a danger in misusing one's baptism. Marshall warns, "Beware of making baptism an idol by putting it in the place of Christ. . . . Be careful also not to make your baptism an equal partner with faith in your salvation" (*Ibid.*, 203).

16. The label "Evangelical" has taken on a wide variety of meanings. For clarification, the capitalized form of "Evangelical" in this paper refers to the wider meaning in contrast to the lower case

how he makes use of baptism for his daily growth in sanctification, one would be hard pressed to find a definitive answer. Some would not even understand the question. The sad fact is that baptism just is not very real to many Evangelical believers.

Since baptism takes place only once, numerous Evangelicals view baptism as an event that happened in their past. To their detriment, it never occurs to them that it has application to their current daily walk. Yet, consider how John Calvin sets forth the benefits of baptism for the believer's daily life:

We are not to think that baptism was conferred upon us only for past time, so that for newly committed sins into which we fall after baptism we must seek new remedies of expiation in some other sacraments, as if the force of the former one were spent. . . . Therefore, as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins. . . . For Christ's purity has been offered us in it; his purity ever flourishes; it is defiled by no spots, but buries and cleanses away all our defilements.¹⁷

Why are so few Evangelical churches not as devoted to the sacraments as Calvin? One reason likely grows out of their desire to steer clear of an incipient sacramentalism, which is the idea that the sacraments work *ex opere operato*¹⁸ and thereby dispense grace necessary for salvation.¹⁹ Other Evangelical churches are doubtlessly concerned with the

form of "evangelical" that refers to the historical meaning, which affirms with Historic Protestantism the 5 Solas of the Reformation.

17. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 21:1305-6.

18. The Roman Catholic Communion uses the Latin phrase *ex opere operato* to teach how the sacraments function, i.e., "by the very fact of the action's being performed," (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1128). Because the RCC uses the term "sacrament" in this way, some Protestant churches, particularly Baptists, have refused to even use the term "sacrament" and opted for the term "ordinance." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: MI, Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 966.

19. "The Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are *necessary for salvation*." *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dubuque, IA: Brown-ROA, 1994), 1129.

possibility of falling prey to what might be classified, in the eyes of others critical to their theology, as an empty, dead, external ritualism.²⁰

In his chapter titled “The Evangelical Fall from the Means of Grace: The Lord’s Supper,” R. Scott Clark explores why so few modern evangelical churches are devoted to the means of grace:

It is because we have become practically anti-supernatural and simultaneously super-spiritual in our theology, so that we are, on the one hand, bored with God’s ordinary means of grace (the sacraments) and [we have,] on the other hand[,] . . . stopped believing that God can and does use those means to accomplish His purposes. That is to say, we are guilty of a sort of unbelief.

We have replaced the sacraments with spiritual exercises of our own making. A survey of virtually any evangelical bookstore finds dozens of books on spirituality, self-denial, church growth, and recovery from various addictions. Some of these contain useful advice; so did some of the medieval handbooks of spiritual direction. But few of them contain the Gospel, and almost none of them make any reference to the use of the Lord’s Supper as a means to Christian growth.²¹

Dr. Clark’s comments could be equally attributed to baptism. It is rare to hear a sermon on the benefits of baptism in an Evangelical church or to find a book on the benefits of baptism in the Christian-living section of an Evangelical bookstore. Even among more gospel-centered circles, there is a glaring scarcity of resources that make any reference to the use of one’s baptism as a means for growth in sanctification.²²

20. Calvin writes, “We . . . cannot otherwise derive benefit from baptism, than by having all our thoughts fixed on the death and resurrection of Christ” *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 22:119.

21. R. Scott Clark, “The Evangelical Fall from the Means of Grace: The Lord’s Supper,” in *The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 133-34.

22. This same lament could also be made concerning the resurrection. While there is an understandable abundance of books written on the centrality of the cross, there are fewer books devoted to the resurrection. One recent exception is Adrian Warnock’s new book, *Raised with Christ: How The Resurrection Changes Everything* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010).

In addition, much of the blame for the lack of emphasis on the sacraments among Evangelicals is due to an impoverished understanding of the gospel.²³ Few Evangelicals have been faithfully instructed on what the Bible teaches about the meaning of the finished work of Christ for their present lives. Jerry Bridges, in his book *The Gospel for Real Life*, asks,

Why do so many believers, including those deeply serious about their Christian commitment, live lives of quiet desperation? One answer is that we have a truncated view of the gospel, tending to see it only as a door we walk through to become a Christian. In this view, the gospel is only for unbelievers. Once you become a Christian, you don't need it anymore except to share with people who are still outside the door. What you need to hear instead are the challenges and how-tos of discipleship.²⁴

Because of this truncated view of the gospel, a host of Evangelicals have become accustomed to feeding on a constant diet of moral imperatives as the means for daily Christian growth. The underlying premise is that believers simply need relevant, practical principles to compel them to obedience and holiness. However, law, whether God-given or man-made, never compels the believer to obedience and holiness (cf. Rom. 7:7-25). In fact, law-driven living leads to cursing rather than blessing (Gal. 3:10). Law merely reveals how a person ought to be or act. Only the gospel empowers the believer to true obedience (cf. Ezek. 36:26-27; Rom. 1:5; 10:17; 16:26).

The legality of Evangelical pop culture has led to an increasing number of Evangelicals to begin looking for something more “substantial” in Catholic or Orthodox churches.²⁵ However, to those Evangelical believers who are burned out on a constant diet of moral imperatives, Michael Horton writes,

23. See David Gibson, “Assumed Evangelicalism: Some Reflections en Route to Denying the Gospel,” <http://www.beginningwithmoses.org/bigger/assumedevangelicalism.htm> (accessed May 10, 2010).

24. Bridges, *The Gospel for Real Life*, 12-13.

25. One of the most prominent Evangelicals in recent years to defect from Protestantism to Catholicism is Francis Beckwith, the former president of the Evangelical Theological Society, who

Here's how I would counsel such a person: Start with the gospel. The gospel creates and sustains the church, not the other way around. If the Evangelicalism familiar to you has been a constant stream of imperatives—moral exhortation, whether in rigid and legalistic or warm and friendly versions—the antidote is not to follow *different* rules for attaining justification, but a constant, life-long, unremitting immersion in the good news that Jesus Christ's obedient life, death, and resurrection are sufficient even to save miserable Christians.²⁶

The answer to burned-out Evangelicals is neither Rome nor Constantinople but Calvary! The great need is for Evangelical pulpits and educators to become self-consciously gospel-centered once again. Evangelicals must recover the centrality of the gospel for all of life and begin heralding good news. One reason corporate worship is lacking derives from ignorance of the centrality of the gospel, which has resulted in a neglect of the sacraments. A recovery of gospel centrality should also involve Evangelical churches' reclaiming sacramental thinking.²⁷ Evangelical pulpits and publishers must begin showing how the sacraments provide believers with a constant, life-long, unremitting immersion in the gospel.

Since baptism points believers to the paramount truths of the gospel, how do believers make proper use of their baptism as a means for spiritual growth? What does

recounts his spiritual journey in *Return to Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009). See also Scott & Kimberly Hahn, *Rome Sweet Home: Our Journey to Catholicism* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1993); Thomas Howard, *Evangelical Is Not Enough: Worship of God in Liturgy and Sacrament* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1984); David Currie, *Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1996); Frank Schaeffer, *Dancing Alone: The Quest for Orthodox Faith in the Age of False Religion* (Salisbury, MA: Regina Orthodox Press, 2002); Peter Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1989).

26. *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*, "Evangelicalism Today, A Symposium: Six Evangelicals Assess Their Movement," <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=20-09-016-o> (accessed March 31, 2010).

27. Concerning baptism, Stephen J. Wellum writes, "Not only is it [baptism] bound up with our Lord's instruction and command to the church, but it is part and parcel of gospel proclamation—a beautiful outward portrayal of the Gospel itself" ("The Means of Grace: Baptism," in Clark, *The Compromised Church*, 162).

baptism signify and seal to the believer? Here briefly are five life-changing benefits of keeping baptism central in one's daily life.

First, keeping baptism central in your daily life promotes genuine confession of sin (1 John 1:9). The truth of the gospel promotes honesty rather than deception, intimacy rather than separation and confession rather than concealment. When Adam and Eve sinned, their immediate response was to conceal their sin (Gen. 3:7) and hide from God (Gen. 3:8). The presence of God no longer engendered desire for fellowship but fear. The voice of God wrought terror rather than trust.

However, the voice of God in the gospel comforts rather than terrifies sinners. Grace, not condemnation, elicits genuine confession. The gospel truths signified and sealed in baptism free guilt-laden believers from seeking to rationalize, deny, excuse, or cover up sin regardless of how ugly and shameful it may be. By keeping baptism central in one's daily walk, the Christian is continually reminded of his cleansing and forgiveness of sins, of having been united to Christ in His death, burial and resurrection, and of having been adopted into God's family.

Baptism assures the believer that as surely as the water washes away dirt from our body, so Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit wash away the impurity of all our sins.²⁸ Baptism assures believers that they have an advocate before the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous (1 John 2:1).

This assurance of peace with God through Christ (Rom. 5:1) frees the believer from fear of God's vindictive wrath (1 John 4:18). Without assurance of these gospel blessings, the believer's impulse toward God will be to hide in fear as Adam and Eve. Concealment rather than confession will characterize one's life. Walter Marshall notes,

You have to believe in God's forgiving and accepting grace if you are ever going to sincerely confess your sins. . . . A pardon will much sooner open your mouth to a

28. Westminster Theological Seminary, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, question 66.

real confession of sin than the words, “Confess or be hanged,” or “Confess or be condemned.” If you want to truly confess your sins, first believe the gospel! Believe that “God is faithful and just to forgive your sins” through Christ (1 John 1:9).²⁹

Baptism assures the believer of God’s forgiving and accepting grace. John Calvin writes, “There is no doubt that all pious folk throughout life, whenever they are troubled by a consciousness of their faults, may venture to remind themselves of their baptism, that from it they may be confirmed in assurance of that sole and perpetual cleansing which we have in Christ’s blood.”³⁰

Second, keeping baptism central in one’s daily life frees the Christian from a performance-driven, duty-driven mentality. Gospel-centrality drives the believer to consciously renounce any confidence in his own goodness and performance (or lack of performance) as a means of meriting or losing God’s favor (cf. Phil. 3:8-9).

The gospel truths signified by and sealed in baptism liberate the believer from a sense of slavish duty and legal obligation. It reminds us that the Christian life is no longer, “Do and live, or else be cursed” (Gal. 3:10). Rather, it is now, “Fear not and live, for all is already done” (cf. Luke 2:10-11; Rom. 12:1; Eph. 4:1).

In 2 Corinthians 5:14, Paul writes, “Christ’s love compels us.”³¹ Paul was not motivated by thoughts such as, “I obey; therefore, I am loved.” Rather, he lived by the principle, “I am loved; therefore, I obey.” The driving force in Paul’s life was his constant, daily, heartfelt awareness of the gospel (cf. Gal. 2:20; Phil. 3:12). Again, Marshall writes,

Have faith first, and your apprehension of God’s love for your soul will sweetly draw and compel you to love God and His service. “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). You cannot love God before you understand his love for you. You must perceive His love if you are going to love Him. If you look upon God as someone who is against you, who hates you, and who condemns you, your own

29. Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 109-10.

30. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 21:1306-7.

31. All Scripture quotations are taken from the *English Standard Version*[®]. Copyright © 2001.

innate self-love will breed hatred and rebellion against Him. . . . The first right and holy thoughts you can have of God are thoughts of His grace and mercy to your soul in Christ...Get these thoughts first by believing in Christ, and they will produce in you love to God. You will think all kinds of good thoughts about him! . . . You will see God as just and merciful, and you will extend His grace to others.³²

Performance-based discipleship plagues a large portion of Evangelical churches and believers today. Paul addressed this error in the book of Galatians when he wrote, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh” (Gal. 3:3). Paul is asking, “Are you trying to be perfected by your own sinful efforts?” Paul argues that the Christian life progresses and finishes exactly the way it starts. The way *into* the Christian life is also the way *on* in the Christian life. Philip Ryken, commenting on Galatians 3:3, explains,

From start to finish, the whole Christian life is by grace through faith. A new life in Christ commences with faith, continues by faith, and will be completed through faith. To put this another way, the gospel is for Christians just as much as it is for non-Christians. We never advance beyond the good news of the cross and the empty tomb. . . . There-fore, the Christian always looks back to the gospel and never to the law [i.e., performance] as the basis for his righteousness before God. . . . There is no such thing as performance-based Christianity. . . . Justification is a doctrine for the whole Christian life from start to finish. It is not simply a doctrine for coming to Christ in the first place. . . . Justification is a doctrine to live by each and every moment.³³

Baptism continually reminds the believer that justification is a doctrine to live by each and every moment. Our obedience (i.e., performance) contributes nothing to the ground of our standing before God. Obedience is merely a response of gratitude. Good works are the effect of divine grace rather than the cause. Good works never commend the believer to God because, as Question 62 of the Heidelberg Catechism states, “even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.”³⁴

32. Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 108.

33. Philip Graham Ryken, *Galatians*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2005), 90-92.

34. Westminster Theological Seminary, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, question 62.

The Lord's favor does not rest upon believers because of their performance but because they are "in Christ!" Calvin explains, "Our righteousness is not in us but in Christ, that we possess it only because we are partakers in Christ; indeed, with him we possess all its riches."³⁵ Again, Calvin remarks, "Though works are highly esteemed, they have their value from God's approval rather than from their own worth."³⁶

It is only through the gospel that we are declared to be right with God and it is only through the gospel that we are kept right with God. Baptism directs the Christian outward to Christ and never inward to his performance as the basis for his righteousness before God. This is why baptism must be kept central because it keeps the gospel central in our daily lives.

Third, keeping baptism central serves to break the crippling power of false guilt and assure our troubled consciences before God. Few things are as spiritually paralyzing as a guilty conscience. Only the gospel has the power to extinguish the flaming fires of a troubled, guilt-laden conscience. In 1 Peter 3:21, Peter writes, "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Christ's resurrection was victory over death and the completion of our salvation. Through baptism, our thoughts are fixed on Christ's victorious death and resurrection. Baptism assures us that Jesus' death manifests His love and willingness to save and His resurrection manifests His power and ability to save.

Whenever a believer is troubled by an acute awareness of his sins, he must remind himself of his baptism and from it be confirmed in the assurance of that sole and perpetual

35. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 20:753.

36. *Ibid.*, 20:750.

cleansing which he has in Christ. John Calvin, discussing assurance and a troubled conscience, writes,

Now if we ask in what way the conscience can be made quiet before God, we shall find the only way to be that unmerited righteousness be conferred upon us as a gift of God...we profit nothing in discussing righteousness unless we establish a righteousness so steadfast that it can support our soul in the judgment of God...For no one can ever confidently trust in it [one's obedience] because no one will ever come to be really convinced in his own mind that he has satisfied the law, as surely no one ever fully satisfies it through works.³⁷

This is where baptism plays such a vital role in the believer's growth and sanctification. Baptism is given to sinners who groan and are wearied and oppressed by their sins. John Calvin explains that baptism is given to sinners "in order that they may have something to lift them up and comfort them, so as not to plunge into confusion and despair."³⁸

Baptism serves to assure the Christian that Christ's unmerited righteousness has been conferred upon him. Baptism guarantees the believer that all of his guilt and shame have been washed away. It makes certain God's love, thereby quieting the conscience and instilling confidence for the day of judgment (1 John 4:17-18).

Fourth, keeping baptism central serves as a sure testimony of the believer's union with Christ. John Calvin writes,

Our faith receives from baptism the advantage of its sure testimony to us that we are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united to Christ himself that we become sharers in all his blessings. For he dedicated and sanctified baptism in his own body [Matt. 3:13] in order that he might have it in common with us as the firmest bond of the union and fellowship which he has deigned to form with us.³⁹

37. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 20:765.

38. Ibid., 21:1306.

39. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 21:1307-8.

Union with Christ by faith is necessary and sufficient for both our justification and our sanctification (cf. Rom. 6). A self-conscious awareness of one's union with Christ has profound ethical implications in the believer's daily life (cf. Rom. 6:3-5; 1 Cor. 6:12-20). Awareness of one's union with Christ aids the believer in mortifying his flesh and living out his new life in Christ. Calvin writes,

But he [Paul] also takes hold of something far higher, namely, that through baptism Christ makes us sharers in his death, that we may be engrafted in it (Rom. 6:5). . . . And, just as the twig draws substance and nourishment from the root to which it is grafted, so those who receive baptism with right faith truly feel the effective working of Christ's death in the mortification of their flesh, together with the working of his resurrection in the vivification of the Spirit (Rom. 6:8).⁴⁰

The believer grows in holiness as he is increasingly made aware of and assured of his union with Christ. The Apostle Paul teaches that baptism does just this.

Fifth, keeping baptism central in our daily lives gives strength and courage in the midst of our war with sin. Without hope and joy, the believer will not have the strength or courage to war against indwelling sin. Baptism provides strength and courage because it assures the believer in the midst of his struggles that his union with Christ is secure. Walter Marshall writes,

You are more sinful than you can imagine! The doctrine of Original Sin is true! You cannot reform your flesh! You cannot become a better person by your own strength no matter how hard you try! But cheer up! If you are a Christian, you have come into union with Christ. Through faith in Jesus Christ you are forgiven. Through faith in Jesus Christ you are sanctified and made holy. Through Christ, you are a new creation! The Holy Spirit lives in you! Therefore, pursue the life of faith in Christ with all diligence.⁴¹

Baptism seals the promises of the gospel and thereby supplies courage in the midst of the fight. Through baptism the battle-weary believer is assured that the Lord will not count his sin against him (Rom. 4:8) because he is at peace with God through Jesus Christ (Rom 5:1). He lives in the freedom of no more condemnation (Rom. 8:1). He rests in the

40. Ibid., 1307.

41. Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 13.

knowledge that God the Father has predestined him for adoption as a son through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:5-6). Confirmation of gospel promises such as these sustains the believer in his daily fight with remaining sin.

All believers would do well to regularly reflect upon their baptism. Walter Marshall counsels, “Frequently ask yourself this question: Unto what was I baptized? . . . What does baptism seal? What did my baptism obligate me to? Stir yourself up and strengthen yourself by your baptism. Lay hold of the grace that it seals to you, and fulfill what it calls you to be and do before God—to live as one who has died and risen with Christ.”⁴²

As Evangelical churches return to gospel centrality, may they also seek to keep baptism central. Baptism is one of the means of grace the Lord has ordained to strengthen our faith and drive us forward in our daily walk. For this reason, it is important—and we neglect it to our own spiritual demise. May gospel-centered churches once again emphasize the great benefits of this visible gospel for the sinner’s joy and the Savior’s glory.

42. Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 204.

Bibliography

- Armstrong, John H., ed. *The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998.
- Belgic Confession. <http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/BelgicConfession> (accessed March 24, 2010).
- Bridges, Jerry. *The Gospel for Real Life: Turn to the Liberating Power of the Cross . . . Every Day*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002.
- Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Vols. 20 and 21 of *The Library of Christian Classics*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960.
- Calvin's Commentaries*. Vol. 22. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Dubuque, IA: Brown-ROA, 1994.
- Clark, D. Marion. "Baptism: Joyful Sign of the Gospel." In *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, edited by Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W.H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III, 170-92. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2003.
- Clark, R. Scott. "The Evangelical Fall from the Means of Grace: The Lord's Supper." In *The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis*. Edited by John H. Armstrong, 133-48. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998.
- Gibson, David. "Assumed Evangelicalism: Some Reflections en Route to Denying the Gospel." <http://www.beginningwithmoses.org/bigger/assumedevangelicalism.htm> (accessed March 10, 2010).
- Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994.
- Marshall, Walter. *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification: Growing in Holiness by Living in Union with Christ*. Put into modern English by Bruce H. McRae. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005.
- Ryken, Philip Graham. *Galatians*. Reformed Expository Commentary. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2005.
- Ryken, Philip Graham, Derek W.H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III. eds. *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2003.
- Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*. "Evangelicalism Today, A Symposium: Six Evangelicals Assess Their Movement." <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=20-09-016-o> (accessed March 31, 2010).
- Ursinus, Zacharias. *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*. N.d. Reprint of 1852 edition. Translated by G. W. Williard. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, n.d.

Wellum, Stephen J. "The Means of Grace: Baptism." In *The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis*. Edited by John H. Armstrong, 149-70. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998.

Westminster Theological Seminary. *The Heidelberg Catechism*.
<http://www.wts.edu/resources/Heidelberg.html> (accessed March 22, 2010).

Witsius, Herman. *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*. 1677. Reprint. Vol. 1. Kingsburg, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990.

© John Fonville

Permissions: Permission is happily granted to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not revise the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to this document on Paramount's website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by John Fonville.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By John Fonville.