

## 2. CONCERNING REBAPTISM

Two overtures were received by the Synod of 1974 concerning rebaptism. The Theological Commission had already begun work on rebaptism prior to 1974. Our report and recommendation follow.

The issue of rebaptism emerged in the Christian church at an early date. Controversy arose already in the third century about the validity of the baptism of certain fringe or sectarian groups, and the need to rebaptize those who later sought re-entry into the traditional church. While the African and some Eastern churches demanded rebaptism, the churches of Rome and Alexandria did not. The latter recognized "sectarian baptism" as valid as long as it had been administered in the name of the Trinity, and those so baptized were again received into the church with only the solemn laying on of hands. Subsequently the Roman and Anglican churches have practiced rebaptism, and the Baptist churches likewise with the regularity of a custom, although it is noteworthy that some Baptist theologians are now raising serious objections to the continuance of the practice. (1)

Historically, our own church has never made any pronouncements with respect to rebaptism, although in practice we have never sanctioned it and have always accepted as valid previous baptisms, if administered in the name of the Trinity. The issue of rebaptism emerging in our church at the present time does so in the wake of various evangelistic and renewal movements in which baptized and confessing Christians have fresh experiences of God's grace in Jesus Christ through the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and who then seek rebaptism.

### **The Problem: Why Do Baptized, Confessing Christians Seek Rebaptism?**

#### *A. The desire to authenticate a revitalized faith.*

Those seeking rebaptism have often been reared in Christian homes, baptized in infancy, and later have made confession of their faith in Jesus Christ, but who have viewed their previous Christian lives as nominal and passive. Then some new experience of divine grace triggers spiritual renewal. When this happens, some assume that prior to their recent experience, they had no real relationship to Christ and the Holy Spirit. Others conclude that their previous relationship to Christ and the Spirit were simply elementary and initiatory, and that they now have something which can be called a "fulness of the Spirit." For one reason or the other, believers often seek rebaptism to give expression to their renewed faith and life, and in so doing are often registering no more than a public affirmation of the new thing God has done in their lives.

#### *B. The desire to be obedient to the word of God.*

Renewal experiences are commonly associated with and stimulated by a new interest in the study of the Bible. Participants in renewal movements often have a genuine desire to be obedient to the Word of God, but some, being unskilled in the Scriptures, may too easily be persuaded to accept some simplistic or slanted reading and interpretation of a particular passage. A case in point is Acts 2:38 where we read, "Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Pentecostalism understands this passage as presenting a sequence of responses (repentance, baptism, forgiveness, Holy Spirit) which is binding and normative. (2)

Another case in point is that believers who experience the "baptism in the Spirit" are often persuaded to accept "believer's baptism" when they are confronted with the claim that such baptism is "the clear and obvious pattern of Scripture." It is not sufficiently acknowledged that the New Testament does exhibit various sequences.

#### *C. The doubt of the validity of infant baptism.*

Those who seek rebaptism may do so because they have been persuaded to call into question the adequacy and validity of their previous baptism in infancy. Not all Neo-Pentecostals seek rebaptism. Roman Catholic Neo-Pentecostals do not contest their infant baptism, and interpret "baptism in the Spirit" in terms of "confirmation," a new experience of the presence and power of the Spirit given them in infant baptism. Unhappily, in Protestant churches this is not always the case, and one observes instead a questioning tendency with respect to infant baptism which has weakened the doctrine and practice of infant baptism.

This new questioning of the doctrine and practice derives not only from Pentecostalism, but from a variety of factors and forces characteristic of the spiritual climate of our time. For over a decade, mass evangelism programs and revival movements have concentrated largely on adult decisions and believer's baptism. A continuing anti-establishment mood of distrust still fosters indifference or opposition to the church, its liturgy and sacraments, its offices and discipline. The new individualism of our time evidences a mistaken impatience with the corporate concepts and relationships of Scripture. Even in contemporary theology, there is to be noted a perceptible shift from the objectivity of God's action on our behalf to the subjectivity of man's response to God's action. All of these factors together with the impact both of Pentecostalism and American fundamentalism have had an eroding effect on the doctrine and practice of infant baptism. Undiscerning capitulation to changing winds of doctrine (Eph. 4:14) however, needs to be resisted lest the church become a captive of cultural and religious change that is only faddish and temporary, and lest the church lose its evangelical and confessional character.

### **Response to the Problem**

#### *A. To expressing a revitalized faith.*

It is important to interpret carefully the nature of the new spiritual experience which seeks the validation of rebaptism. When believers speak of having been "baptized in the Holy Spirit," they often refer to a new experience in which Christ became more real to them, in which the fellowship of prayer and study of the Word took on new joy and vitality, in which they became empowered in some particular way for specific forms of service for Christ. Such experiences or times of spiritual refreshment from the Lord are not occasions for adverse judgments about one's previous baptism or relationship to Christ, but rather occasions for gratitude that God continues to confirm and renew his earlier work of grace in the lives of his chosen people. Indeed, we deny on scriptural grounds that such experiences should be interpreted as "baptism in the Holy Spirit." (3)

Our churches and pastors do well to encourage new and continuing responses to the grace of Christ, new depths of commitment to him, new fillings of or yieldings to the Spirit, but as affirmations of God's earlier work of grace both in baptism and in confirmation of baptismal vows. Indeed, believers should be encouraged to anticipate many continuing experiences subsequent to their baptism, and not merely a "second" or even a "third blessing." Such continuing experiences marked believers in the apostolic church (Eph. 5:18; Phil. 1:6), and should be more characteristic of the church today than is often the case. Such experiences, however, are new fillings of the Spirit (Eph. 5:18) and ought not to be interpreted as "baptism in the Spirit." While all true believers have the indwelling of the Spirit (Rom. 8:9; I Cor. 12:13), it is possible for them to avoid or evade the continued infilling of the Spirit, even "to grieve the Spirit" (Eph. 4:30), and "to quench the Spirit" (I Thess. 5:19). Therefore the church does well to gird itself for interpreting such experiences of sanctifying grace biblically and confessionally, and to be more earnest in its call for daily repentance and renewal. (4)

It needs also to be stated that a second baptism is an inappropriate and mistaken symbol for validating an experience of spiritual renewal. Baptism appears in the New Testament as a one-time sacrament by which the Spirit introduces us into the covenant of grace, into Christ and the body of Christ. The sacrament is a dramatic representation and confirmation of the gospel and not first and foremost of our experience. We affirm that other and more appropriate ways of authenticating renewal experiences should be cultivated in our churches such as services of confirmation, reaffirmation or reconsecration, times of sharing in koinonia groups, prayer and testimony opportunities. It is also fitting to make the celebration of the Lord's Supper an occasion for expressing repentance, deepened communion with Christ and commitment of all gifts to him.

#### *B. To the desire to be obedient to the word of God.*

Those seeking rebaptism often do so for alleged biblical reasons. As noted above, some find such incentive in the particular sequence of responses mentioned in Acts 2:38: "Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." The sequence of believer's baptism, repentance-baptism-forgiveness and then Holy Spirit baptism as a second experience, separable from and subsequent to conversion, is often taught as a sequence that is normative for all believers. The history of biblical interpretation should warn us against building important doctrines on the precarious base of a pattern or sequence contained in one or a few biblical passages.

The New Testament does correlate repentance, faith and baptism in examples of adult conversion (Acts 2:38, 41; 8:13, 38; 9:18, etc.), and in the missionary situ-

ation of the early church it is understandable that adult conversions are emphasized in the Book of Acts. Such is still the case today, and adults are received into the membership of Christ's body and receive the sign of God's promises to his people (baptism), following upon their faith and repentance. This must not be understood to mean, however, that faith and repentance must precede baptism in every instance, as in the case of infants. Scripture teaches that God's promises are not only to believing individuals, but also to families, to believers and their children (Acts 2:39; 11:14; 16:15, 33; 18:8; I Cor. 1:16; 7:14). Moreover, the sequential pattern of Acts 2:38 is reversed at Acts 10:48, thereby cautioning the reader against claiming too much for supposed "clear and obvious patterns of Scripture." When it is contended, therefore, that obedience to the word of God is the ground of a rebaptism practice, the contention must be judged to be unscriptural.

*C. To the doubt of the validity of infant baptism.*

Those seeking rebaptism may do so because they have been persuaded to doubt or reject the validity of infant baptism in favor of so-called "believer's baptism." In the face of many factors and forces which prompt a new questioning of infant baptism in our time, it is incumbent upon the church to present again this basic doctrine for our time. While we do not believe that this is our task now, we do remind the church that baptism signifies and seals to us the whole treasury of Christ's benefits, and that we spend the rest of our days living out of that treasury. Baptism signifies and seals to us the whole gospel, all the promises of God's grace and not simply a grace suitable for babes. And we affirm again that baptism is the sign and seal of God's saving work for his covenant people, including their children. The following is offered as a brief statement of our basic doctrine:

First, baptism is the sign and seal of God's gracious action.

Every baptism whether adult or infant testifies first and foremost to what God has done and will do for his people, and not only to what has happened or will happen to a particular individual. Baptism signifies, therefore, inclusion in God's covenant of grace (Acts 2:38, 39; Rom. 4:11), ingrafting into Christ and union with him in his death, burial, and resurrection (Col. 2:11, 12; 3:5-17; Rom. 6:3-5; I Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27, 28), cleansing from sin and free forgiveness (Acts 22:16; I Cor. 6:11; Eph. 5:26), regeneration and renewal (John 3:3-8; Tit. 3:5b; I Pet. 3:21), and confession of Christ (Acts 8:36f.; Rom. 10:9; Eph. 5:26; I Pet. 3:18f.). All this rich treasury of God's grace is represented to us in baptism and sealed to us by the Holy Spirit (II Cor. 1:21-22; Eph. 1:13f.; 4:30). Grace always precedes faith, and faith is the effect and not the condition of grace (Eph. 2:8).

This emphasis on the objectivity of God's gracious deeds in Christ is understandably present in our Reformed standards.

We believe that our good God, mindful of our infirmity and weakness, has ordained the Sacraments to seal unto us his promises, to be pledges of his good will and grace to us, and to nourish and strengthen our faith. He has joined these to the Word of the Gospel the better to present to our senses both that which he gives us to understand through his Word and that which he does inwardly in our hearts, assuring and confirming in us the salvation which he imparts to us. For they are visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible action, whereby God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. The signs therefore are not vain or empty so as to deceive us; for Jesus Christ is their reality, without whom they would have no significance. (5)

A theologian of a former day has well said, "We should remember all this specially in connection with Baptism, where the subjectivity and humanism of the day tempt us to think more of the child, or of the family, than of the Church as the center of Christian action and interest . . . An undue subjectivity, by way of sectarian individualism, is the worst depreciation of Baptism. We are not to measure the worth of any Sacrament by the way we feel after it. (6)

Second, baptism signifies and seals our incorporation into the body of Christ.

It marks the beginning and initiates a continuing life in Christ through the Holy Spirit within the body of Christ. Baptism even as Old Testament circumcision is not a private rite but a corporate act with corporate dimensions. Children of believers as well as individual adult believers are considered heirs of the kingdom and participants in the body of Christ.

Both Old and New Testaments clearly show provisions for incorporating households into the membership of God's people (Gen. 18:19; Deut. 6:7; Mark 10:13f.; Acts 2:39; I Cor. 7:14, etc.). The covenant initiated by God with Abraham maintained with faithfulness to Israel, envisaged by the prophets to be renewed to include all the families of the earth, provides the key to the church as the covenant people of God today (Gen. 12:13; 15; 17:7-14; Jer. 31:31-34; Matt. 26:38; Rom. 11:17-24; Gal. 3:7-14, 26-29; Eph. 2:11-22; Heb. 8:12f.; etc.). Jesus delegated his ministry, including baptism, to the church and the church began with vigor to incorporate adult individuals and believing parents with their households into its fellowship (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 2:39; 8:12; 9:18; 10:47f.; 16:15, 33; 18:8). Baptism, therefore, signifies and seals not only reception into the church as institution or nurturing and supportive community, but into Christ and his body. And to be introduced into Christ is to be introduced into the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 6:17; 12:13; II Cor. 3:17-18), for as has been well said, "Christ and the Spirit are not so divided that each must separately and at appropriate times baptize into each other. Baptism into the body of Christ is not a Spirit-less matter upgraded later by a *spiritual* baptism into the Holy Spirit." (7)

Third, baptism signifies and seals entrance into the covenant life.

Baptism introduces the baptized into a continuing covenant life in the course of which he or she appropriates God's promises. These promises are the same for adults and infants. The blessings of baptism are equally prospective for adults and infants. Both are called to appropriate these promises by faith, the child as he matures, the adult at the time of his conversion. Because Baptism is the sacrament of beginning and of initiation into a continuing life in the covenant and the covenant community, its efficacy must not be limited to what precedes it or to what happens to the recipient at the moment of baptism. Baptism seals to us all that Christ intends for us, present, past, and future. It ushers one into life in the covenant community where God shows himself faithful to his promises, where his Word is proclaimed and taught, where obedience, nurture and prayer are the working out of his salvation, and where these keep one in the way of salvation. We affirm that baptism is not only a sign and seal, but also a means of grace.

Fourth, baptism issues in crucial responsibility for the church.

Baptism involves not only the baptized but also the church. In baptism, the members of the body of Christ pledge themselves anew to faithful teaching and to the maintenance of a fellowship of faith and life in which baptized persons are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits. At baptism the whole church engages by life and nurture, first, to lead the baptized to an understanding of their ingrafting into Christ, second, to an understanding of their engagement to be the Lord's and, third, to the privilege of confirming in their own person the vows of their baptism. Every occasion of infant baptism is an occasion when every member of the household of faith should reflect on the meaning of his own baptism, and examine himself with respect to the faith for which he was claimed, and to the Cross by which he was bought. As has been well said, "Baptism does not mainly concern the child or parents. It is an act principally for the church. The whole church in faith and spirit enters the cleansing stream. It revives by faith its sense of the new and eternal life of forgiveness. It measures its own faithfulness to its regenerative redemption . . . And it resolves anew, prays anew, to be faithful to the end, to keep and renew its Baptism till death." (8)

Baptism, then is not wrong when applied to children but it is wrong when separated from the Word of the Gospel and from the nurture which is provided by the church through its faith and life. Jesus' death and resurrection were one time, unrepeatable acts on behalf of our salvation (Matt. 20:22f.; Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50), signed and sealed to us in "one baptism" (Eph. 4:5; I Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27f.). This has been the confession of our church through the centuries:

For this reason we believe that every one who desires to enter eternal life ought to be baptized but once with this unique Baptism without ever repeating it, since we cannot be born twice.

This Baptism, however, is not only efficacious so long as the water is on us and received by us, but through all the days of our years. That is why we reject the error of the Anabaptists, who are not satisfied with the one

only baptism they once received, and who moreover condemn the baptism of children of believers, whom we believe ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the Covenant, as the infants in Israel were circumcized upon the same promises that are made to our children. (9)

Nothing can alter God's saving deeds on our behalf, and no sin of man can undo them. It is possible for one to deny or renounce his baptism, but even when so denied, one cannot undo his baptism for it remains to become his judgment (Heb. 6:4f.; 10:26-27). God's promises to such a person will be realized, however, when he comes to repentance and becomes again as a little child and takes refuge only in the grace of Christ.

It is for these reasons that rebaptism poses serious difficulties for the Reformed Church in America. On the grounds of Scripture and the Confessions, the church affirms the validity of infant baptism, and the validity of all baptisms in the name of the Triune God. (10) Rejection of the doctrine and the practice of infant baptism does not jeopardize one's membership in the one holy catholic and apostolic church, but it does jeopardize the peace and unity of the Reformed Church and places one in conflict with its confessional position. (11)

#### ENDNOTES

- (1) A. Gilmore, *Baptism and Christian Unity* (1966), 13f., 75ff.
- (2) Donald Gee, *God's Great Gift* (no date), 55ff.
- (3) Cnf. "The Baptism in the Holy Spirit," *Theological Commission Report*, General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, 1975.
- (4) John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, ch. 15.
- (5) *The Belgic Confession*, Art. 33, Cnf. also Art. 34; *Heidelberg Catechism* Lord's Days 26, 27 (*Liturgy and Psalms*, R.C.A.).
- (6) P. T. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments* (1949), 190, 208.
- (7) F. D. Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (1973), 293.
- (8) P. T. Forsyth, op. cit., 181f.
- (9) *Belgic Confession*, Art. 34. Likewise *the Second Helvetic Confession*, a widely accepted confession in the Reformed tradition, declares: "There is but one baptism in the church of God; for it is sufficient to be once baptized or consecrated unto God. For baptism once received does continue all a man's life, and is a perpetual sealing of our adoption to us." Art. 20 (Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. III).
- (10) "A Statement on Infant Baptism," The Theological Commission, Reformed Church in America, *Minutes of the General Synod* (1967), 189-196.
- (11) *Belgic Confession*, Articles 32-34; *Heidelberg Catechism*, Questions 66-74; "The Order for the Sacrament of Infant Baptism," (*Liturgy and Psalms*, R.C.A.); Canons of Dort, Headings 3-4 (Articles 8-11), 5 (Art. 10, 14); *Book of Church Order*, R.C.A., Formulary, "The Declaration for Ministers."

#### *Counsel commended to the Church*

The following counsel is commended to the church relative to the issue of rebaptism:

1. We cannot be but grateful to God for the evidences of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our time. It is an occasion for rejoicing when the faith and life of believers is invigorated by new infillings of the Spirit, when there is new appreciation of the fruit and gifts of the Spirit, when there is new earnestness in the study of the Word and new depth of commitment to Jesus Christ. Ministers and elders should freely communicate this attitude, and full acceptance in brotherly love of those who claim "charismatic" experiences should be the rule among us. Members of our churches with new experiences of revitalized faith should be encouraged to share them with us and not withdraw to groups outside their own church, and be given counsel on how best to express and affirm their new experiences. Those who desire to participate in groups outside their own congregation should recognize their Christian duty to exercise brotherly affection and love, and do all in their power to promote the unity and peace of the church.

2. Ministers and elders are urged to give new emphasis in preaching and teaching to the doctrine of God's covenanting grace and the sacraments which are signs and seals of that covenanting, and the sacrament of infant baptism in particular. They are also urged to give renewed attention to discipline with respect to the sacrament. The church ought not to baptize indiscriminately.

It is disconcerting to discover how much misunderstanding and superstition attach to infant baptism in the popular mind. Spurious understandings of it may be due in part to neglect of it in our preaching and teaching or to some ill-advised

departures from our liturgy in its administration. In some of our churches, a review of Christian education and nurture may be in order. In other churches, more may be needed by way of supportive structures for those who yearn for a sense of belonging and of Christian worth. A ministry of caring by both pastors and elders is a great need in many of our churches.

3. Ministers and elders are urged to respond to the issue of rebaptism with discernment and restraint. Not all who have sought it and who may seek it, do so for identical reasons. When rebaptism has been entered upon because it represented at the time a seemingly appropriate, familiar expression of a revitalized faith, the matter calls for loving and patient counsel. Misunderstanding of the sacrament is involved in such cases. Instruction is needed to show that it is unscriptural to use baptism as a means for expressing an experience of renewal. Those who may seek rebaptism for this reason or because they have been influenced by a "believer's baptism" reading and interpretation of certain passages of Scripture also need instruction in the differences between interpreting Scripture from the Neo-Pentecostalist, individualist stance, and the covenantal orientation of our own tradition. As long as such members evidence the fruit of the Spirit and cherish the unity and peace of the church and do not oppose the doctrine and good order of the church, it appears that pastoral counsel rather than disciplinary action should be our response.

4. When those rebaptized display active, open antagonism to the doctrine of infant baptism and make propaganda for "believer's baptism," it is the duty of ministers and elders to advise them that their action is contrary to the doctrine and practice of the church and disruptive of its peace and unity. In such instances, it is an act of Christian love to allow dissident members to transfer without prejudice to some other Christian church which practices adult baptism only, in advance of the disciplinary action required by our *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 2.

5. When the situation arises where ministers and elders in the Reformed Church do not subscribe to its doctrine and practice and are not loyal to its witness and work, it may be well to advise both ministers and elders that any departures from the ordination vows of their offices as specified in the formularies of the church should be submitted to their appropriate judicatory for counsel and decision, according to the ordinances of our church.

6. When rebaptized persons leave the active membership of our church for a period of fellowship with groups outside their congregation, the church should be slow to terminate their membership without their express consent, and allow generous time for counsel, reflection, and reconsideration. When those who have been rebaptized, after a temporary departure from the church, indicate a desire to return, the church should welcome them in a conciliatory manner, ascertain whether they still consider themselves members of the Reformed Church in America, and whether they are willing to submit themselves to the doctrine, discipline and practice of the church.

While we believe this issue calls more for pastoral than judicial action on all levels of our church life, we do deem rebaptism a serious doctrinal error, and deem it a seriously mistaken action for any minister or Board of Elders to voice or record a policy or position of advocacy of rebaptism, and one contrary to the confessional standards and the *Book of Church Order*.