

## THEOLOGY

### Report of the Theological Commission

The Commission on Theology has met in two regular sessions since the last General Synod: October 25-27, 1982, at Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan, and January 31-February 2, 1983, at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey. The commission's report is in two parts:

- I. Work completed
- II. Work in progress

#### I. WORK COMPLETED

The commission is pleased to submit two responses to referrals from the General Synod. The first is a study of infant dedication as an alternative to infant baptism, made at the request of the General Synod of 1981. The second study concerns the underlying moral and spiritual issues raised by the practice of abortion, and was done at the request of the General Synod of 1982.

##### A. Is Infant Dedication an Alternative to Infant Baptism?

In response to an overture from the Classis of South Grand Rapids, the General Synod of 1981 instructed the commission to "study the biblical, theological, and/or pastoral foundation for the practice of dedicating infants as an alternative to infant baptism" (*MGS 1981*, p. 121). In recent years there has been widespread discussion of this issue, particularly as it relates to both the role of children in covenantal theology and the responsibility of ministers and elders in receiving families from denominations whose practice differs from the RCA. The commission recognizes the need for continuing discussion with those in the church catholic whose position regarding infant baptism differs from Reformed belief and practice. However, the commission believes the RCA should not compromise its position on this issue. This study therefore addresses itself to the following: the Reformed position on infant baptism, the meaning of infant dedication, infant dedication as an alternative to infant baptism, and the pastoral approach to those who request infant dedication.

##### *The Reformed Position on Infant Baptism*

Since 1967, the commission has presented three studies in regard to the Reformed position on infant baptism. The first, "A Statement on Infant Baptism," notes that

while there is no direct, unequivocal biblical evidence for the practice of infant baptism, we believe there is indirect evidence and that the practice of infant baptism is biblically, theologically, sociologically, and historically valid and meaningful (*MGS 1967*, p. 189).

The 1967 study reaffirmed the historic Reformed understanding of the covenantal nature of the church. Covenantal theology has its roots in the Old Testament, where God chose Israel as his people, entered into covenant with them, and established the rite of circumcision as the sign of the covenantal relationship. This rite was administered both to believing adults and children (Gen. 17:10-14). In the New Testament God reaffirmed his covenant in the church through Jesus Christ, and baptism replaced circumcision as the sign of this covenantal relationship. Thus, as the study asserts, children also bear the mark of the covenant and are members of the community of faith:

As members of the covenant community, children are entitled to its privileges, one of which, the initiatory rite, is the sign of the covenant. Having come in place of circumcision, which was the initiatory rite and sign of the old covenant (Gen. 17:11; Rom. 4:11) and was given to all future heads of families, Christian baptism is likewise administered to children. Baptism is a sign of membership in the covenant community, that one belongs to the people of God (Matt. 28:19f.); circumcision bore the same significance (Gen. 17:10-14). Baptism witnesses to the righteousness which is the believer's by faith (Titus 3:5-7); so did circumcision (Rom. 4:11). Baptism symbolizes cleansing from sin (Acts 22:16; Rom. 6:4; Titus 3:5); so did circumcision (Col. 2:13). The two rites, circumcision and baptism, are so similar in significance that the Apostle Paul equates them in Col. 2:11f in order to show that they were but two rites which, in different periods, stood for the same covenantal relationship to God. The Christians at Colosse, he says, were circumcised in Christ. How were they circumcised?

“With a circumcision made without hands,” he replies. It was “the circumcision of Christ.” And when we ask what this was, we are informed that it was Christian baptism. Baptism has come in the place of circumcision and infants are to be baptized as heirs to the Kingdom of God and his covenant (*MGS 1967*, p. 192).

In 1975, the commission’s second study strongly argued against the practice of rebaptism. Noting the covenantal orientation of the Reformed Church, the study reconfirmed the practice of infant baptism as the entrance sacrament into the church through which God’s promise of salvation is sealed. Baptism once, both to believing adults and children of the faithful, is the sign of the covenant (*MGS 1975*, p. 177).

In 1977 the commission presented its third study, “Baptized Non-Communicants and the Celebration of the Lord’s Supper.” The first section describes how baptism is to be understood in the life of the church;

The idea that the sacrament is a purely symbolic rite finds no support in the New Testament. On the contrary, baptism is a means of grace whereby God is pleased to incorporate us into his covenant of grace with his people. And to be introduced into the covenant is to be introduced into Christ and the blessing of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 6:17, 12:13; 2 Cor. 3:17-18). While accomplished for us by God in Christ, it also signifies a continuing life in, with, and for Christ, and of adoption and resurrection unto everlasting life (*MGS 1977*, p. 294)

The study also refers to the strong doctrinal statement of the *Heidelberg Catechism*:

*Are infants also to be baptized?*

Yes, because they, as well as their parents, are included in the covenant and belong to the people of God. Since both redemption from sin through the blood of Christ and the gift of faith from the Holy Spirit are promised to these children no less than to their parents, infants are also by Baptism, as a sign of the covenant, to be incorporated into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Covenant by circumcision. In the New Covenant Baptism has been instituted to take its place. (Q. 74).

Although the 1977 study addressed the specific question of the place of children at the Lord’s Table, it is clear that the commission also confirmed the practice of infant baptism. The study concludes with a recommendation that the church may rightly consider admitting baptized children to the Lord’s Table.

The Reformed position outlined in the commission’s three studies confirms the *Liturgy and Psalms*.

In fulfillment of our Lord’s institution and command, the Church, acknowledging God’s gracious covenant with his people, recognizes the Sacrament of Baptism as a sign and seal of membership in the body of Christ both to believing adults and to children of the faithful.<sup>1</sup>

Baptism is a sign and seal of our ingrafting into the body of Christ. We are baptized in the name of the Triune God, who thereby assures us of the forgiveness of our sins, through the blood of Christ; of our adoption into the household of faith; of our daily renewing and cleansing by his Spirit; and of our resurrection to eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

The sacrament of baptism is clearly a central act of the church and its meaning is not diminished for children of the faithful. One baptism for believing adults and the children of the faithful remains the belief and practice of the church.

### ***The Meaning of Infant Dedication***

According to *A Manual of Worship*, by John E. Skoglund, which includes an order for dedication of a child common to those used in non-covenantal traditions, dedication is an act in which a child is symbolically offered to God.<sup>3</sup> During the service itself parents are acknowledged to be the recipients of God’s grace, but there is no affirmation that children receive such grace. In the act of dedication parents, in partnership with the church, simply promise to teach and train their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.<sup>4</sup> That children eventually become adult members of the body of Christ rests in large measure on the ability of parents to bring them to confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. While

dedication, then, is meant to focus the efforts of parents and the church on fostering Christian confession, it does not affirm children as members of the body of Christ. Nor does dedication assure the gracious promises of God to the children of the faithful. *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice*, by Norman H. Maring, seems to support this observation:

Instead of baptizing infants, Baptists often dedicate such children to God. In such a service, parents and congregation publicly express their acceptance of the responsibility to offer every help and encouragement to their child, seeking to lead him to become a committed Christian in later years. There is value in such a special ceremony, which impresses upon home and church alike the importance of cooperation in providing Christian nurture.<sup>5</sup>

Parents may choose to bring children to the church to be dedicated. Dedication is not a mandate of the church. Nowhere is it recognized as the means by which individuals are grafted into the body of Christ. Therefore, what happens when infants are dedicated cannot be described as sacramental. Rather, infant dedication serves as a hope of the church and parents that those dedicated may one day acquire full recognition of God's children.

It is interesting to note that infant dedication is not a universally accepted practice among non-covenantal traditions. Dedication developed in part as a response to infant baptism rather than as a custom rooted in Scripture. J. Clyde Turner, in *The New Testament Doctrine of the Church*, states that:

Some Baptist churches have instituted the custom of public dedication of babies. This would probably never have been thought of if those who practice infant baptism had not spoken of the rite as the dedication of their children to the Lord. Certainly children should be dedicated to the Lord; but this is primarily a matter for the parents, and the wisdom of making it a church ceremony is doubtful.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Infant Dedication as an Alternative to Infant Baptism**

The Reformed Church believes baptism as instituted by Christ himself to be essential in the life of the church. It affirms baptism to be the sign and seal of membership in the body of Christ. Therefore, it does not consider infant dedication to be an alternative to the sacrament of baptism. Just as the church does not consider a weekly prayer breakfast, no matter how inspiring, to replace the Lord's Supper, it cannot give sacramental value to infant dedication.

Baptism is a channel of God's grace. Though parents and members vow to nurture their children in the way of Christ in the act of baptism, the primary significance of baptism is in what God accomplishes by his grace. The church carries out the mandate to baptize children of the faithful, but God himself is active in the sacrament to fulfill his promises. Further, there is no biblical foundation for dedication of children as a mandate of the church. According to her vow before God in exchange for the birth of a son, Hannah took Samuel to the house of the Lord at Shiloh while he was very young and "lent him to the Lord" (I Sam. 1:9ff). Though this act is often described as dedication, there is no suggestion in Scripture that the act should be preserved as a lasting ordinance of God's people. By "lending" Samuel to God Hannah fulfilled an individual vow which she had made before God. Her personal response is not meant to be followed by all believers. Throughout the history of the church, baptism has been the entrance rite of God's people. Nowhere in Scripture can one find a command to dedicate.

While it was a common custom for infants to be brought to the temple for the ceremony of presentation (Luke 2:22ff), this ceremony signified the redemption of the first-born male by the offering of a substitute sacrifice of two turtledoves or pigeons. Even in the life of Jesus, circumcision was the mark of the covenant (Luke 2:21). Later Jesus declared that baptism was to be the sign of the new covenant which he had established (Matt. 28:18-20).

In the New Testament there is no indication that infant dedication should be considered a practice of the corporate church. Always, baptism is described as the one sacrament through which persons, young and old, receive the promise of God and are grafted into the body of Christ.

Therefore, to propose dedication of children as an alternative to baptism is contrary to the biblical evidence; it also demeans the sacrament as instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ. The church should not seek lesser alternatives when it has affirmed so clearly the sacrament of baptism.

### ***The Pastoral Approach to Those Who Request Infant Dedication***

The commission commends to the church the following counsel for those who request infant dedication:

1. There should be a renewed emphasis in preaching and teaching by ministers and elders concerning baptism. Ministers and elders should the meaning and responsibilities which attend the sacrament. As families with children who are baptized understand and fulfill the baptismal vows, they become examples to those who enter the church from non-covenantal traditions. The value of the sacrament will become apparent; example is a significant teacher.
2. The sacrament of baptism is both privilege and obligation. In the preaching and teaching of the church, careful consideration should be given to the way in which the sacrament is presented to those considering membership in the Reformed Church. The sacrament provides the occasion to celebrate the inclusiveness of God's grace, which extends beyond believing adults to their children. Though involving certain responsibilities, baptism is primarily the means by which God welcomes into the household of faith the children of those who recognize that life's greatest comfort is to know Christ as Lord and Savior. It is the task of the church to nourish this belief.
3. Ministers and elders should make clear to those who request infant dedication that no such liturgical practice exists in the Reformed Church. While parents may choose not to seek infant baptism, ministers and elders should make every effort to inform such people that the church practices infant baptism for sound biblical and theological reasons. Because they bear office in the church, ministers and elders should neither encourage nor practice infant dedication as an alternative to baptism.
4. Ministers and elders are urged to respond to those who request infant dedication with understanding and patience. People do not change their traditions overnight. It is possible for a congregation to embrace those of differing traditions and to show them, by work and example, the validity of infant baptism. However, ministers and elders ought not set aside the sacraments of the church as a means of bringing people into a congregation.
5. Ministers and elders should not assume that everyone who requests infant dedication understands the meaning of infant baptism. Having counselled with parents seeking infant dedication and having invited them to witness the joys and privileges of the sacrament, ministers and elders should encourage a continuing relationship between the congregation and the parents.

#### ***Endnotes***

<sup>1</sup>*Liturgy and Psalms* (New York: RCA, 1968), p. 27

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 28

<sup>3</sup>John E. Skoglund, *A Manual of Worship* (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1968), p. 235

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 236

<sup>5</sup>Norman H. Maring and Winthrop S. Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity And Practice* (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1963), p. 133

<sup>6</sup>J. Clyde Turner, *The New Testament Doctrine Of The Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951), p. 71

#### **R-1.**

**To approve the study, "Is Infant Dedication an Alternative to Infant Baptism?" and to request the General Synod Office to implement its distribution in such a way that every minister and consistory member in the RCA has access to it. (ADOPTED)**