

Baptism

In response to the instruction of the 2006 General Synod that the commission “study the issues concerning who may request infant baptism and report back to the 2007 General Synod” (*MGS 2006*, R-64, p. 252), the commission submits the following paper and recommendation:

WHO MAY PRESENT CHILDREN FOR BAPTISM?

Who may bring infants for baptism in the Reformed Church in America? In 2006, the classis of Montgomery overtured the General Synod to change the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part 1, Article 5, Section 2a, to read (addition underlined), “It [the board of elders] shall consider requests for infant baptism, providing at least one parent or guardian or adult relative in the same household is a confessing member of the church to which the request is presented” (*MGS 2006*, p. 251). In response, the General Synod voted “to instruct the Commission on Theology to study the issues concerning who may request infant baptism and report back to the 2007 General Synod” (*MGS 2006*, p. 252).

This is a question with a long and lively history in the Reformed Church in America. Before attempting to engage the theological and pastoral issues implicated in the recent overture more directly, it will be useful to trace that history. Prior to 1976, there was no guidance in the Constitution at all regarding who could present infant candidates for baptism. We get a sense of the practice of the Reformed Church, however, by considering the comments of William Demarest in his *Notes on the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America*.¹ Demarest’s book was a widely used commentary on the Constitution, not having any binding force in itself, but reflective of the approach to the Constitution in the first half of the twentieth century. In addressing the practice of baptism in the Reformed Church, Demarest comments:

Who are privileged to bring their children? Parents both of whom are members of the church. A father or a mother who is a member of the church; and the two parents may stand together in the ceremony. Widely it is held that the parents, or a parent, baptized but not in full communion may bring a child. Parents not full members or even baptized—shall they be allowed baptism for their child especially in some crisis or distress when they sincerely and urgently ask it? The child may be dying and, not without some superstition perhaps but at least with anxious desire for the sign of salvation upon him, eager for comfort, the parents ask the sacrament. Probably most ministers would grant it (p. 148).

Demarest’s comments suggest a fairly wide range of ministerial practice, including some baptisms reminiscent of the Puritan “Halfway Covenant,” in which parents who were baptized but had not made profession of faith could still present their children for baptism. Demarest even allows the possibility of “emergency” baptisms, in which an infant might be baptized even when the parents are neither professing Christians nor even baptized. Similar comments can be found in other RCA church leaders in the first half of the twentieth century.

By the time we get to the 1960s, when the entire liturgical practice of the church was under review, we begin to see attempts to “tighten up” church practice on this question. In 1966, the Committee on the Revision of the Liturgy recommended that the following statement be added to the Constitution:

The Sacrament of Infant Baptism shall be administered to a child only if at least one of the parents, natural or otherwise, be a member of the Christian church and that parents, natural or otherwise, of the child must in some way be amenable to the Board of Elders of the church in question (*MGS 1966*, pp. 213-214).

This recommendation was adopted by the General Synod and referred to an editorial committee. At the next General Synod, in 1967, a similar amendment to the Constitution was adopted by the synod and recommended to the classes for approval. It read:

The Sacrament of Infant Baptism may be administered only to a child, at least one of whose parents or guardians is a communicant member of the church and is amenable to the Board of Elders of the church in which the sacrament of baptism is to be administered (*MGS 1967*, pp. 182, 185).

The amendment failed to win approval by two-thirds of the classes, and thus for a time, the Constitution continued to lack any specific guidance on the subject.²

The matter remained dormant until the 1970s, when several overtures on the subject began again to appear. In 1975 the Classis of Orange sent an overture requesting a different wording of the same section of the *Book of Church Order (BCO)*:

“[The Board of Elders] shall consider requests for infant baptism, providing at least one parent or guardian is a communicant member of the Christian Church” (*MGS 1975*, p. 82).

This language was adopted by the synod in 1975, and subsequently approved by the classes (with six classes dissenting) and incorporated into the *BCO* in 1976. For the first time, there was explicit guidance in the Constitution regarding who may present infants for baptism. It is worth noting, however, that this amendment did not require that parents or guardians be members of the church in which the baptism was to be administered; they were only required to be a “communicant member” of “the Christian Church.” Presumably, anyone who could claim communicant membership in any church could present infant children for baptism.

It wasn’t long before overtures arrived seeking further clarification. In 1976 two overtures appeared. One, from Lake Erie Classis, recommended the following wording for the *BCO*:

The elders may grant permission for the baptism of an infant child when the parent or parents, guardian or guardians, are Christians and members of that congregation over which the elders have oversight (*MGS 1976*, p. 102).

Another overture, from Dakota Classis, recommended the following wording:

[The Board of Elders] shall consider requests for infant baptism, providing at least one parent or guardian is a communicant member of the local RCA congregation. When a request for baptism is received from a parent or guardian who is a member of another Christian Church it must first be approved by the judicatory of that congregation before it is granted (*MGS 1976*, p. 102).

Both overtures attempted further to tighten the guidance in the *BCO* on who may present

candidates for baptism, and both were referred to the Commission on Theology for further consideration.

In 1977 the commission, responding to the two 1976 overtures, referred the matter to the Committee on Church Order, favoring the intent of the overtures. In 1978 the commission on Church Order acted on the urging of the Commission on Theology, and offered an amendment to the *BCO*, which read,

[The Board of Elders] shall consider requests for infant baptism, provided at least one parent or guardian is a communicant member of the church to which the request is presented. A request for baptism from a parent or guardian who is not a member of the church to which the request is made shall first be submitted for approval to the governing body of the church where the parent or guardian has membership (*MGS 1978*, p. 244).

This amendment was adopted by the synod, approved by the classes, and incorporated by the 1979 Synod into the *Book of Church Order* (*MGS 1979*, p. 47). This remains until today as the language of the *BCO* (1.I.5.2.a).

Several things stand out in this brief history of the question. We see a progressive narrowing and focusing of the question regarding who may bring candidates for baptism. Up until the 1970s, there was no guidance in the Constitution on this question, and practice in the RCA was quite diverse. The first constitutional change, incorporated into the *BCO* in 1976, restricted the admission of infants to baptism to those children whose parents who were communicant members of “the Christian Church.” This in effect excluded baptized parents who had not professed faith for themselves from presenting infants for baptism. Still, however, parents were not required to be members of the local congregation where baptism was celebrated in order to bring their children for baptism.

The second change, inserted into the *BCO* in 1979, further restricted boards of elders, requiring that parents who wish to present infants for baptism must be communicant members of the church in which the baptism is to be administered. Further provision was added to allow for another church to provide approval for the baptism in a case where the parents would not be members of the church where the baptism was celebrated.

Several other points are also worth noting. Prior to 1976, the Constitution mentions nothing of the role of elders in receiving candidates for baptism, even though it grants to elders the general supervision of the sacraments. Demarest’s comments seem to suggest that the decision was regarded as belonging primarily to ministers rather than to elders. But from 1976 onward, the *BCO* clearly locates the decision about admission of infants to baptism within the Board of Elders, as part of the general pastoral oversight of the congregation. This deepening role of elders is also directly related to the requirement that parents who bring infants for baptism must be communicant members of the church in which the baptism is administered. Such a move enfolds parents and children together in the overall pastoral care that is the responsibility of elders. This change locates covenant families more clearly and explicitly within the covenant community, the flesh-and-blood relationships that mark the body of Christ.

Both these changes represent significant improvement and clarification of the church’s practice. Parents who bring children for baptism must not only be baptized; they must also be believers who are actively living out their faith and fully participating in the life of the church. Moreover, the vows that are part of the baptismal liturgy assume that the family of the baptized child is part of the family of God that the congregation pledges, in the baptismal liturgy, to support in fellowship, prayer, and service. These changes have helped make baptism in the RCA a deeper communal and congregational experience.

With this background we can return to the more focused question posed by the overture that prompts this study. In contrast with earlier disputes, the question before us now is not whether the person bringing an infant for baptism should be a member of the church where baptism is celebrated. That is not contested in this overture. Instead, the focus is on who may be considered a parent or guardian. May relatives of an infant or child, other than the parent or guardian, bring that infant or child for baptism if they are part of the same household?

Practically speaking, this proposal to allow other relatives to bring children for baptism presents two somewhat distinct pastoral challenges. Consider, first of all, this case: Christian grandparents or other relatives play a significant role in the lives of the children and live in the same household with these children. They take special responsibility for the spiritual care of the children. Yet these relatives are not the parents of the child, and the parents themselves are not professing Christians or members of a church. These believing relatives and household members may long to see the children they love given the sign of God's covenant. These relatives may even bring the children regularly to church. In such cases, particularly in churches where baptized children are admitted to the Lord's Table, these unbaptized children may feel marginalized or excluded. Could not a relative who lives in the same household, in such instances, bring a child for baptism, even though that relative is clearly not the parent of the child? Might not such a practice recognize the baptismal solidarity of households found in Scripture itself (e.g., Acts 16:15, 31-33; 18:8; 1 Corinthians 1:16)?

A second case is similar, but reflects other ambiguities. Here, grandparents or other relatives may exercise substantial parental responsibility for children, particularly in cases where biological parents are incapable of fully exercising their own parental responsibilities. In these cases, even though the grandparents or other relatives may not be the legal parents or guardians, they still are the functional parents in the home. What should be done in these instances, in which the legal and functional parents are not necessarily the same person? Can a functional parent bring a child for baptism, and assume the vows of parents in the Liturgy, assuming the biological or legal parent is willing?

In order to address these pastoral challenges, we must first recall why parents are invited to bring their children for baptism in the first place. We baptize our children because God has promised to be our God and the God of our children. Deuteronomy 30:6 declares, "Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart *and the heart of your descendants*, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live." Jeremiah 32:38-39 makes a similar promise: "They shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for all time, for their own good *and the good of their children after them*." Peter recalls a similar promise from Joel in his Pentecost sermon: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and *your sons and your daughters shall prophesy*, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams" (Acts 2:17). This is the promise recalled later in Peter's sermon, when he declares, "For the promise is for you, *for your children*, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:39).³

Parents bring their children for baptism because God has promised to be their God and the God of their children. Just as circumcision was a sign of this promise in the Old Covenant, so baptism now replaces circumcision as the covenant sign in the New Covenant (Colossians 2:11-12). Although circumcision was given only to the male members of households in the Old Covenant (e.g., Genesis 17:9-14), in the New Covenant, baptism is given to all the members of Christian households (e.g., Acts 16:15, 31-33; 18:8; 1 Corinthians 1:16).

Yet the promise on which baptism is based, to be God to us and to our children, is never interpreted in the New Testament to apply to all subsequent generations, as if all that is required for baptism is to identify some Christian ancestor. (Even within Judaism, the covenant promise was never so interpreted.) Rather, we find in the New Testament a particular interest and concern with households as the context in which God's promise is worked out, to be our God and the God of our children. The early church understood God's covenant promise to extend to the children of believing parents, to those who were members of Christian households.

But who counts as a "parent," and what makes a household "Christian"? Those are the questions that this overture poses more sharply. The Christian church has always recognized that parenthood is not restricted biologically. Adopted children have always been welcomed for baptism without hesitation or qualification. Legal guardians are also explicitly authorized by the *BCO* to bring children for baptism. But in North American society in the twenty-first century, parental responsibility often has become more diffuse. Many children of divorce live in more than one household and have several people who exercise some parental responsibility for them. Multigenerational families often share parental responsibilities in significant ways. Some parents abdicate any substantial exercise of their parental responsibilities, and other people—friends, neighbors, relatives, coaches, etc.—step into the vacuum for the child. How are we to sort through these complex situations?

We begin by recognizing that God may use diverse means to bring divine grace to children, using many people—not all of whom are parents, and not all of whom are part of the child's household. We can give thanks for the ways in which God raises up others to care for children who need parental love. We should recognize these relationships as true channels of God's love and grace.

This does not mean, however, that these relationships, as precious as they may be, are a sufficient basis to bring a child for baptism. We baptize in response to God's promise. And God's promise, throughout Scripture, is given to believers *and to their children*. If the child we bring for baptism is not *our child* in some unique sense, then we have no basis in Scripture for bringing that child for baptism. Moreover, none of us can promise to raise a child as a Christian, as the baptismal liturgy calls us to do, when the child is not our child. The reason is simple: we do not have the authority to make such decisions for a child who is not our child. If we are not the parents, we are making promises for the child that we may not be able to keep.

Here we come to one important principle that must be kept in mind when sorting through the many pastoral challenges raised by this overture: It is vital to respect and honor the integrity of the liturgy for baptism, which calls parents to promise that the child will be raised as a Christian. If the person bringing the child for baptism does not exercise the kind of parental role that can permit the baptismal promises to be made with integrity, such a request for baptism should not be approved. Likewise, the integrity of the vows of the congregation should be preserved. The congregation's promise to love, encourage, and support the child should not be treated lightly, and the congregation's commitment to sustain the community of fellowship, prayer, and service in which the child will grow should be meaningful.

But baptism is about more than *our* promises; it is centrally about *God's* promise, to be our God and the God of our children. So when is a child "our child," and when, therefore, can we baptize on the basis of God's promise? The commission believes that this is essentially a question about where recognized primary parental responsibility lies. In almost any situation, the parent is the person where "the buck stops" when it comes to decisions regarding a child. This is usually the biological parent. It may be an adoptive parent or legal guardian. In other contexts, it may be a relative or someone else in the household—

perhaps even someone who is not the legally recognized parent, but who has assumed primary parental responsibility for the child. This, the commission believes, is the most helpful way to interpret the present language of the *BCO*, which speaks of “parents” and “guardians.” (It is worth noting that the *BCO* does not stipulate “legal guardians” but simply “guardians.” Whether such language was originally intended to have a wider interpretive range may be debated, but given our present context, some flexibility in interpreting this word may be helpful for the church.)

The commission believes, furthermore, that elders should be free to exercise their own pastoral and contextual judgment regarding where the recognized, primary parental responsibility for a child falls. Even if the legal situation may be out of synch with the reality “on the ground,” elders should be free to welcome any candidates for baptism who are brought by a confessing church member who exercises a recognized, primary parental responsibility for a child. Such responsibility should be recognized by others, and not just claimed by the individual. It should also be primary in the sense that the person is the normal decision-maker in the care and nurture of the child. Parental responsibility is often diffused among multiple persons, but elders should ensure that the person bringing a child for baptism exercises a central and pivotal responsibility in the care of the child. Anything less compromises both the integrity of the baptismal vows and the household solidarity on which baptism is based. But any individual who has this kind of primary parental relationship with a child may bring that child for baptism, on the basis of the promise of God to be God to us and to our children.

Such situations are, of course, full of blurry lines and difficult pastoral judgments. Consider a teenage mother who lives, together with her child, in her parents’ home. She is at school, and most of the care of the child is in the hands of the child’s grandmother. Who has the “primary parental responsibility” in such instances? The grandmother may exercise such a role for the present, but longer-term relationships may be hard to determine. These are circumstances that cannot be addressed in the abstract; rather they call for pastoral judgments that must be made by elders who are familiar with the specifics of each situation. The role of elders is to make prayerful and thoughtful decisions informed by Scripture, the Reformed tradition, and sound pastoral insight. The commission believes that the best course is to lay out the underlying principles and to trust boards of elders to apply them appropriately in specific circumstances. Those underlying principles include preserving the integrity of the baptismal vows, keeping in focus God’s promise to be God to us and to our children, and keeping the focus on the everyday life of household relationships as the context in which the Christian nurture of the baptized infant is lived out throughout that child’s life.

In situations where this primary parental responsibility is not exercised by the legal parent or guardian, elders should do their best to ensure that the legal parent or guardian is nonetheless involved in the decision to bring a child for baptism, and that the legal parent or guardian supports the decision. The consent of the legal parent or guardian, even if that person is not making most of the parental decisions, is essential, and baptism of infants should not take place without it. Moreover, such engagement with legal parents who struggle to fulfill their responsibilities may present important opportunities for the congregation and its leaders to exercise further pastoral care with families under duress.

But what shall we say of believing grandparents, aunts, uncles, or other relatives who may be part of a household together with a child, but may not have the recognized, primary parental responsibility for a child? Can they bring a child for baptism on the basis of “household solidarity” as we see in texts such as Acts 16:15, 31-33; 18:8; and 1 Corinthians 1:16? Here the picture is murkier still. On the one hand these relationships, like many others, are clearly channels of God’s grace; they are the means that the Holy Spirit often uses to draw these children into life in Christ. Yet in such cases we lack a clear

and compelling scriptural basis for baptizing children on the basis of these relationships. We know clearly from Scripture that God promises to be our God and the God of our children. There is every reason to believe that the household baptisms depicted in the New Testament were done on the basis of this divine promise to be our God and the God of our children. But it is an unwarranted leap of logic, and quite unattested throughout Scripture and Christian tradition, to claim that the faith of any household member is sufficient warrant to baptize any *other* household member.

Moreover, such a practice would raise further problems. Might the conversion of a sibling be a sufficient basis for baptizing a fellow sibling? Yet we find no such precedents in Scripture. Even the definition of a “household,” when separated from the question of primary parental responsibility, is problematic. Must a household live under the same roof? Isn’t an extended family in some sense a “household?” If we separate household baptism from primary parental responsibility, almost any (even distant) relative of a church member could conceivably be baptized. Yet such a practice ends up separating baptism from the fundamental parental and familial relationship addressed by the promise of God.

Consequently, the commission sees no need for the proposed amendment from the Classis of Montgomery. Elders may exercise good pastoral judgment in ambiguous situations to determine who is a “parent” or “guardian,” but to broaden further the description of who may bring children for baptism lacks scriptural warrant and removes the focus of baptism from the divine promise to be our God and the God of our children.

One further pastoral observation may also be helpful in this context. This concerns unbaptized children who may come to church with an aunt or grandparent, and who may feel excluded from the Lord’s Table because they have not been baptized. Here elders may well exercise a different sort of pastoral judgment, and may discern, even in younger children, the signs of faith that invite baptism, not on the basis of the faith of the parents, but on the basis of the faith of the child. Particularly where such young faith is nurtured by a family member who provides guidance, it may be entirely appropriate for elders to proceed with the baptism of such children, and for these children to continue to be nurtured in the faith, providing, of course, that the parents are willing for the child to take this step. The discernment of the appropriate age for baptism on the basis of profession of faith is also a matter where elders should exercise their careful and prayerful judgment in ways that are both faithful and flexible.

R-100

To approve the paper “Who May Present Children for Baptism?” and to encourage boards of elders to use the paper for study and reflection on baptismal practice and the spiritual care of children and families. (ADOPTED)