

The Baptized Body

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Preface

In addition to being hurried and unpolished, *The Baptized Body* is a narrow and polemical little book. It is narrow because it focuses on a single question in the theology of baptism—the question of baptismal efficacy: What does baptism do to the baptized? That is an important question, but it's far from the only important question regarding baptism and, to my way of thinking, far from the most interesting question about baptism. I'd much rather be writing a book about the typology of baptism, or examining the social and political import of baptism, or even considering how post-Reformation changes in baptismal practice helped to forge modern civilization. Perhaps someday I can turn back to those subjects. As it happens, the question of baptismal efficacy is the most contentious question concerning this sacrament in the Reformed world today. Hence this book.

And so to the polemics. The polemical character of this book is somewhat oblique. I only rarely name people I'm disagreeing with, and I spend virtually no time evaluating and refuting their arguments. There is a reason for that: I don't want to condemn this book to a two-week shelf life. The question of baptismal efficacy is a perennial one in the church, and it will remain an important question when all the current controversies are a dim memory. When all the dust has settled, when advocates of "Federal Vision" or "Auburn Avenue" theology are either expelled from every major Reformed denomination or grudgingly permitted to stay, when gings-on in Moscow, Idaho, are a faint memory even for those

who specialize in the arcana of American church history, I'd like this book to remain useful. It would please me if this book made some contribution to resolving today's disputes. I'm not expecting that to happen (truth be told, I'm expecting the opposite), but it would please me. It would please me far more if a reader with no knowledge of these disputes could happen upon this book in the dusty backroom of a used book shop long after I'm dead and find it edifying.

I've mentioned "Federal Vision" theology. I couldn't help but do that, since I wouldn't be writing this book if the Federal Vision had not become a controversial "movement" in the Reformed world. As much as I'd like to avoid mentioning it, now it's done, on the page, and no turning back. What can I say to that? What is the Federal Vision?

There is as much controversy about what the Federal Vision is and what its advocates teach as about the particular issues involved. That's partly due to diversity among the Federal Vision advocates themselves. It's also partly due to the fact that some associated with the Federal Vision are speaking what amounts to a different theological language from their counterparts. As a friend put it, Federal Vision theology sounds like speaking in tongues to some in the Reformed world. Finally, it's partly due to the fact that when mud is slung, few mud-slingers can rival Reformed mud-slingers.

Whatever the reasons, Federal Vision theology has been described as works-righteousness, covenant nomism, sacerdotalism, sacramentalism, Arminianism, Amyraldianism, Eutychianism, the road to Catholicism, Scotism, and many other things. According to some, the Federal Vision represents another gospel, and for some in the Reformed world the Federal Vision is so perverse that its advocates cannot be considered Christian brothers. It has confusingly been conflated with the New Perspective on Paul, and older controversies about the work of Norman Shepherd have been stirred in to add flavor. For some, the central problem with the Federal Vision is that it denies justification by faith, which no one has ever done; or election, which no one has ever done either.

For others, the central problem with the Federal Vision is that it denies the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, a doctrine considered by some to be so central to the gospel that anyone who questions it almost ceases to be a Christian. Some say the Federal Vision teaches that all the baptized are savingly united to Christ, and so it leads to presumption; the same people, in the same breath, say the Federal Vision teaches that some in the church will fall away, and so undermines assurance. It teaches that we can trust in baptism; it teaches that we cannot. It teaches salvation by obedience; it teaches antinomian trust in external rituals. It teaches that we have assurance through baptism; it teaches that we have no assurance at all. Indeed, it is a strange and multi-headed beast, and it has awakened dragon-slayers and would-be dragon-slayers throughout the Reformed world.

What is at the heart of the Federal Vision? I cannot speak for all those wearing the FV logo, but in my view the Federal Vision is centrally about the issues I address in this book: Baptismal efficacy, to be sure, but more importantly and fundamentally, the nature of signs and rites, the character of the church as the body of Christ, the possibility of apostasy. At its heart, the Federal Vision is about ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. The most important chapter in this little book is the third, “‘The Body of Christ’ Is the Body of Christ.” As I see it, the Federal Vision’s central affirmation is this: *Without qualification or hedging, the church is the body of Christ.* Everything the Federal Vision says about baptism, about soteriology, about apostasy flows from that affirmation.

This central affirmation may seem uncontroversial, and at one level it is: Every Christian says the church is the body of Christ. The nub of the debate is how that affirmation is developed and unpacked. On this issue, much that the Federal Vision says has roots in the Reformed tradition, and some associated with the Federal Vision are quite traditionally Reformed in their sacramental theology and ecclesiology. Others, such as myself, are more critical of some aspects of traditional Reformed theology and suggest revisions, some of which have radical and wide-ranging implications. Yet, I hope even at my most “radical,” I have remained true to one

of the most fundamental of Protestant commitments, namely, that Scripture—not tradition, not even the Reformed tradition—is the final rule of faith and practice.

I like to say that the whole project is an effort to drag conservative Reformed churches, all kicking and screaming, into the twentieth century, the century of ecclesiology.¹ With this little book, unpolished and polemical, narrow and hurried, I hope to drag us all a few more inches.

1. That is not a lapse or a misprint. I know we've been in the twenty-first century for the better part of a decade. One has to start somewhere and temper ambition with realism.

1

Starting Before the Beginning

To understand baptism, we need to start not *at* the beginning—with the various passages that deal with baptism, the mode and subjects of baptism, and so on—but *before* the beginning. We need to begin with the unexamined and often false assumptions about God, man, the world, the church, salvation, rituals, and signs that shape and sometimes control our theology of baptism.

Paul writes that the Roman Christians have all been united to Christ in His death and resurrection by baptism (Rom. 6:1–7). Paul is so sure the Roman Christians already know this and agree with him that he makes this point as a question: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death?” (v. 3). He expected the Romans to answer, “Oh, yes, of course we know that.” Yet, many cannot take Paul at his word. According to them, “baptism” doesn’t refer to the “sign” of water but to the “thing” that the water symbolizes. Paul isn’t talking about the baptismal rite itself. He isn’t telling the Romans they were dead and risen with Christ by *baptism*, but by that to which baptism points.

Which raises three basic questions: First, if he didn’t mean baptism, why did he say baptism? Second, how do these commentators *know* Paul wasn’t referring to baptism? Third, what assumptions about the world drive this interpretation? Why would anyone doubt that Paul is talking about water?

One can answer the first question by observing that the word “baptism” can have a variety of meanings, so, the question is always

what that word means in a particular context. I'll address that problem at length in chapter 2, where I'll argue that "baptized" in Romans 6 refers to the water-rite of Christian baptism.

Another answer to the first question goes something like this: "There is a 'sacramental union' between sign and thing. They are distinct but not separable, and therefore the writers of Scripture sometimes refer to the 'sign' when they are talking about the 'thing.'" By this argument, however, any passage about sacraments can be turned into a passage that is *not* about sacraments. Does Paul say that the loaf is a "communion" with the body of Christ? Well, he doesn't mean the actual physical loaf, but the "thing" to which the loaf points. We can read 1 Corinthians 10:16–17 and remain safely Zwinglian. Does Peter say that "baptism now saves you"? Well, he isn't referring to water, but to that which the washing points. "Baptism now saves you" is a colorful way of saying "Christ now saves you." "Baptism now saves you" means "Baptism now saves you."

This is hopeless. By this procedure, we can neutralize any passage about the sacraments. In the end, we will have no sacramental theology and perhaps no sacraments.

The answer to the second question—how can anyone *know* Paul is not talking about water baptism?—is closely bound up with the first. Readers know that Paul was not referring to water baptism in Romans 6 because water can't do the things Paul says "baptism" does here. It's self-evident that water cannot join us to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

Why then does Paul use the word "baptism"? Because the biblical writers sometimes refer to the "sign" when they mean . . . You get the point. That is precisely the argument in John Murray's *Christian Baptism*, still very much a standard treatment of the subject in Reformed circles. Though Murray doesn't go so far as to say that "there is no water in Romans 6," he does say "it is not the rite of baptism that is in the foreground" because the "thing" of union with Christ is in the foreground. With a wave of his hands and a few irrelevant quotations from other Pauline letters, Murray concludes that "reference to the rite may have receded almost to the

point of disappearance.” This is not a cogent argument because it is not an argument at all. It is assertion.

The answer to the third question is found in, with, and under these assertions. A pile of rotting assumptions lies buried in Murray’s analysis that needs to be respectfully exhumed and given decent but decisive burial. For instance: One reason for denying that “baptism” in Romans 6 refers to the Christian rite of initiation is a fear of attributing too much power to water. In his recent systematic theology, Robert Reymond, in the tradition of Murray, argues that, despite speaking of sacraments as “effectual means of salvation,” the Westminster Confession and Catechisms make it clear that “there is nothing in the sacraments *per se* that saves.” Armed with this assumption, a commentator is almost forced to conclude that Paul is not talking about water. If he were, then he would be attributing power to the sacrament itself. Hence:

1. *Paul says the baptized are united to Christ in His death and burial, so that they may be raised.*
2. *We know that water-baptism doesn’t have this kind of power.*
3. *Therefore, Paul cannot be talking about the water-rite.*

Anyone who thinks Paul is attributing power to baptism can be neatly dismissed with a single old Princetonian sneer: “Sacerdotalist!”

Seas of ink have been poured out in debating whether there is any efficacy in the sacraments “in themselves.” The whole debate is worthless, because both sides begin from the false assumptions that 1) there is such a thing as a “sacrament in itself” and that 2) some things (though not sacraments) do have “efficacy in themselves.” Consider: Baptismal water is a sign authorized by Christ for His church. Validly administered, it is *never* simply water, but the authorized entry rite into the community of disciples (Mt. 28:18–20). We cannot, we dare not, think that this water is “mere water,” any more than we can think of the American flag as “just a piece of cloth.” Water is not a “thing in itself.”

Besides, whatever could it mean for sacraments to operate “by

themselves”? We can only believe this possible if we believe that the world has some degree of autonomy, that the creation has some power or will or force of its own. Reformed people above all should know this is folly. Is it possible for water to exist at all apart from the continuing work of the eternal Word of the Father, who holds all things together, including hydrogen and oxygen atoms? Not if we take Paul seriously. Does the water that washes what remains of my hair in the shower work “by itself”? God forbid! Does the bread I eat on Monday provide life “by itself”? Nothing at all, other than the Triune God Himself, has efficacy “in itself.”

I’m not disputing the Reformed answer. The fact that the question has been raised and taken seriously demonstrates the need for a root-and-branch reform of our baptismal theology. Before we can progress in providing answers about baptism, we have to repent of our questions.

Baptism and the Real Me

Some of our bad questions arise from a faulty view of man and of personal identity, a faulty view that is largely a product of modern individualism.

Baptism is about personal identity. It answers the question, “Who am I?” As I’ve noted, Paul expects the Romans to know that “all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death” and reminded them that “if we have been united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection” (Rom. 6:3,5). Because they are joined to Christ by baptism, the Roman Christians are to “consider [them]selves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11). To use the modern jargon, Paul teaches that a Christian’s “self-image” is grounded in and shaped by the fact of his baptism.

But is this really true? Is the “self-image” that comes from baptism accurate, or is Paul playing a game of “let’s pretend?”

Sprinkling a few drops of water, especially on an infant, can’t change who he really is. It might affect him in some “external” and “legal” ways, but it cannot touch his core identity. To be blunt, if

Abdul is a rank unregenerate unbeliever a moment before baptism, he is still a rank unregenerate unbeliever a moment after baptism. Abdul is still Abdul, even if he's wet. To suggest otherwise is to transform the sacrament into superstition.

That seems reasonable, and yet Paul says, "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death" (Rom. 6:3). How can we make sense of Paul?

For starters, the ("Protestant") notion that baptism does not affect the "real me" and the apparently opposite ("Catholic") notion that baptism supernaturally infuses a habit of grace that transforms the soul both assume the same view of personal identity. Protestants deny that water sprinkled on my body changes the "real me" because the "real me" is a soul tightly and hermetically sealed within my body. If baptism is going to affect me in any fundamental way, it has to be something more than water applied to my body. It has to be infused with magical or supernatural power to penetrate past my skin and touch my heart.

Catholics also deny that an external rite can change who I am, and for the same reason as Protestants, namely, because the "real me" is locked up inside my body. For Catholics, if baptism is going to affect me in any fundamental way, it has to be something more than water applied to my body. It has to be magical, supernatural.

Catholics, of course, believe that baptism injects supernatural power, Protestants don't. But this difference pales in comparison to the more basic agreement between the two, and this fundamental agreement explains why debates between the Protestant and Catholic are so frustratingly inconclusive: How can you begin a debate, much less win it, when your opponent already more than halfway agrees with you? Behind both views of baptism is the notion that the "real me," what makes me uniquely me, is some internal ghostly me that remains unaffected by what happens outside and is unchanged by what happens to my body. Neither the Protestant nor Catholic considers a third option, the possibility that baptism, precisely as an *external* and *physical* ritual, might actually affect who I am. Both the Protestant and Catholic, in short, seek to locate some eternal, unchangeable, autonomous "me" deep

within. Ultimately, this is idolatrous. It is an effort to find some divine me inside the human me. Christians aren't supposed to believe in any such thing.

We can make the point by looking at what the Bible says about the soul and the "inner man." Let's assume for the sake of argument that "soul" in the Bible means "the real, inner, essential me." Even if we adopt this questionable definition, it is clear that the "real, essential me" is affected by the world and by external events. According to Scripture, souls, and not just bodies, hunger and thirst (Ps. 107:9), and hungry and thirsty souls are refreshed when they receive physical food and drink (1 Sam. 30:12). Spanking a child drives foolishness from his heart (Prov. 22:15), and the Torah of Yahweh, which comes as ink on a page or sound waves on the air, restores the soul (Ps. 19:7). When it seems that God is absent and enemies have been unleashed to destroy him, David's soul "pants" for God to come and deliver (Ps. 42:1; cf. vv. 9–10). David would have difficulty singing "It is well with my soul," for when disaster strikes, it is definitely *not* well with his soul.

The fact that the Bible often describes the "inner" man by reference to bodily organs (heart, kidneys, liver) is another hint that Scripture does not sharply distinguish inner spiritual realities from outer physical realities. Even the "inner" man is conceived physically, not as a disembodied, ghostly self. There is always more to a human being than appears on the surface, but being human is always "being in the world" because it is always "being a body." What makes me uniquely me includes what happens to my body.

The point is not that there is no distinction between "inner" and "outer." There is. The tabernacle and temple, which are among other things architectural representations of man, have an "inner" and an "outer" court, and Paul speaks of "inner" and "outer" man (Rom. 7:22; 2 Cor. 4:16; Eph. 3:16). But there is no impermeable membrane between my inner life and my outer life. My inner thoughts and desires come to outer expression, but by the same token what happens to me on the outside affects my inner man. Inner and outer are two dimensions of one united human life.

Given this biblical anthropology, we can see how external

events, like baptism, might affect the person as a whole. A non-priest becomes a priest through the rite of ordination, a single man becomes a husband through a wedding ceremony, a private citizen gains public authority by inauguration. These new identities *are* new identities: The ordained *is* a priest, the man a husband, the citizen a President. We would not say there is some non-priest lurking under the skin, or the President is only “externally” President. Why should we say there is some “unbaptized” self inside the baptized?

Whatever else we must say about a baptized person (and we will say much more), we can say with utter confidence that he is *baptized*, that a minister has poured water on his body in the name of the Triune God, and that this is an irreversible event in his “being in the world.” He emerges from the waters of baptism, and that fact alone means he is a new person. He has received a new name, a new identity, a new past, and he is called to a new future. Abdul is no longer simply Abdul, and he is not simply wet Abdul. Abdul is *baptized* Abdul. That means the “real Abdul” has been changed.

Baptism and the Social Contract

Some of our bad questions are reinforced by bad political theory. What does baptism have to do with politics? you ask. Ahh, that is precisely the problem. That’s one of the questions we need to repent of.

During the Middle Ages, baptism was considered not only a rite of initiation into the church, but an entry into a general citizenship. Priests kept baptismal records not only in service to the church, but as a civil registry. A study by Italian scholars Elena Brambilla and Joaquim Carvalho notes that

Baptism was first and foremost among the sacraments defining, symbiotically, religious together with civil membership: on the one hand it defined compulsory religious affiliation to the only true Church and the only true Catholic faith; on the other hand it determined membership of all individuals, or of the faithful, to that lower, basic level of civil rights or “civil” citizenship which

included all men, rich and poor, women, infants, serfs and slaves, excluded from active or political citizenship.

The novel and revolutionary idea that baptism was a purely religious rite, without any civil implications, took off only in the sixteenth century, among Anabaptists. Anabaptists baptized only professing adults, but the scope of their revolution was much broader. They aimed to uncouple religious and political affairs and undermine the foundational structures of Christendom.

We are all, more or less, Anabaptists now. Few if any advocate a return to a baptismal reckoning of civil rights. Anabaptists certainly made some gains. By undermining Christendom, they also undermined a lot of what must have been hypocritical conformism. Yet, there is, I think, a case to be made for the older practice. Whatever their political allegiances, Christians who baptize babies implicitly confess that religion and society are inseparable.²

For the moment, my concern is not with baptismal citizenship but with another dimension of the connection of baptism with politics. Specifically, I submit that our views of baptism have been deformed by the individualistic politics of the modern age.

According to the great American Catholic thinker John Courtney Murray, John Locke's political theory envisions human beings as hard atoms of human nature. They bump into each other and bounce off each other, but like billiard balls they retain their shape no matter how much of a beating they take from others. Insofar as it is Lockean, modern liberal politics assumes this atomistic view of human nature, which is incompatible with any strong view of baptism. Can a little sprinkle of water change the condition, color, or character of a billiard ball? Of course not.

Social contract theory assumes this vision of human existence. According to the social contract myth, human beings are isolated Egos. Each of us has a will of our own, and each is free to make choices on our own. We are "I's" first of all, though we may, for various selfish reasons, combine with other "I's" into political society. To put it grammatically, though each "I" might address someone else

2. For more discussion along these lines, see the Appendix.

as a “you” and might even combine with others to form a “we,” the “I” remains the first person not only in our grammar charts but in social fact.

As the German-American sociologist Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy frequently protested, however, everything we know about actual human life leads in the opposite direction. We don’t begin life as isolated “I’s.” Infants have little consciousness of their own bodies. They can’t recognize themselves in the mirror. They have no consciousness of being “I’s,” but they are aware quite early of certain significant others. A baby’s world is not centered in her Ego. It centers on others who speak, coo, sing, hum, kiss, nuzzle, smile. These and dozens of other forms of communication are all, grammatically, in the “second person,” saying “you” to the child.

Our grammatical texts lie to us. As Rosenstock-Huessy says, the grammatical second person is the existential and social first person. Were it not for the inane mythologies of social contract theory and liberal politics, this would be more than obvious. Once it’s pointed out, it *is* obvious. Our children only speak in the first person after they have been addressed in the second person; our children develop a consciousness of self after and through their consciousness of others; infants develop a sense of personal identity because we talk to them using names they didn’t choose.

What is perhaps not so obvious is the import of this discussion for baptism. This will become clearer when we ask . . .

Do Baptists Talk to Their Babies?³

Protestants have always emphasized that salvation comes through faith, yet most Protestants have baptized babies. How can these two things hold together? Luther and Calvin held together their insistence on faith with infant baptism by claiming that infants can believe. Baptists see this as the Achilles’ heel of the paedobaptist position, an example of absurd lengths to which paedobaptists are willing to go in defending an untenable practice.

3. The substance of this section was first published as “Do Baptists Talk to Their Babies?” in *Rite Reasons* 47 (September 1996), available at www.biblicalhorizons.com/rite-reasons/no-47-do-baptists-talk-to-their-babies.