

VIDEO SERMON SERIES

Sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism

by Rev. Bartel Elshout

Sermon #34, Lord's Day 27, part 1

The Water of Holy Baptism



The John Knox Institute
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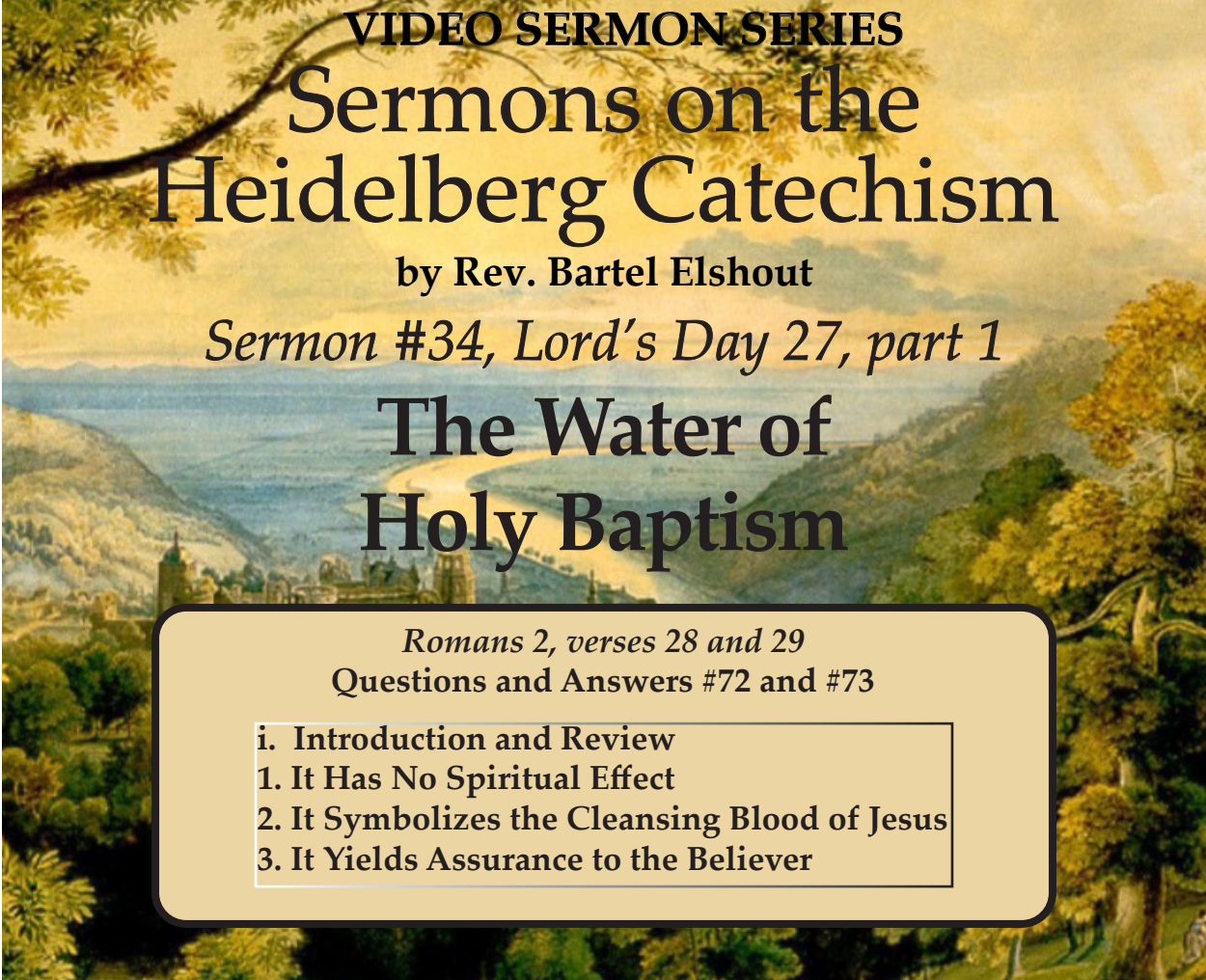
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Sermon #34, Lord's Day 27, part 1

The Water of
Holy Baptism

Romans 2, verses 28 and 29

Questions and Answers #72 and #73

i. Introduction and Review

1. It Has No Spiritual Effect

2. It Symbolizes the Cleansing Blood of Jesus

3. It Yields Assurance to the Believer

Introduction and Review

Congregation, some of you may have wondered why does the Heidelberg Catechism spend so much time dealing with the sacraments—Lord's Day 25, all the way through 30; six Lord's days are devoted to the sacraments. It has everything to do that following the Reformation, the administration of the sacraments became a major issue. And it was a major issue in the city of Heidelberg itself, where those who embraced the doctrines of the Reformation, those who especially embraced that Reformed faith as articulated by John Calvin,¹ came in conflict with those who embraced the Lutheran view. And that prompted the author of the Catechism—which was primarily Zacharias Ursinus,² assisted by Olevianus³—to really address the subject of the sacraments in depth.

And that's also the reason, congregation, why it has been the valuable tradition of the Reformed churches, especially also in the Netherlands, to read the Forms for Baptism at the administration of the sacraments. There's a reason for that, because they wanted to make sure that the essential truths about the sacraments would not be corrupted. They knew all too well from history, that also

¹ John Calvin, or, Jean Calvin, (1509–1564) – was a well-known French theologian, pastor, writer, and leading Reformer in Geneva during the Protestant Reformation, after whom many Reformers patterned their teachings.

² Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583), was a German Reformed theologian and Protestant Reformer who became the leading theologian of the Reformed Protestant movement of the Palatinate, serving both at the University of Heidelberg and the College of Wisdom.

³ Caspar Olevianus (1536–1587).

the doctrine of the sacraments is always in danger of being corrupted. And when the doctrine of the sacraments is corrupted, it impacts how the gospel is proclaimed. Because the sacraments, as we have tried to explain to you, are the visible affirmations of the gospel. So, a wrong view of the sacraments will result in a wrong view of the gospel and the work of salvation itself. And so, it is not just a desirable tradition, or a ritual we go through. But there is a reason, there is a reason why, every time we have baptism, and every time we have the Lord's Supper, we read the Forms. Because the Forms, what are they? They are the articulation of the essential truths of Scripture. They are a summary of the Word of God, to remind the congregation time and again, these are the essential truths that are being communicated also by means of the sacrament.

And so, tonight we're going to look at the second Lord's Day that deals with the sacrament of baptism, Lord's Day 27. I'm going to read the entire Lord's Day, but tonight, I'm only going to consider Questions #72 and #73, and next week, the Lord willing, I will devote an entire sermon on the baptism of infants, because that is a very important subject also today. And so, we will now read the entire Lord's Day 27, on page 56 in the back of your psalter.

Question #72: *Is then the external baptism with water the washing away of sin itself?*

The Answer is: *Not at all; for the blood of Jesus Christ only, and the Holy ghost cleanse us from all sin.*

Question #73: *Why then doth the Holy ghost call baptism "the washing of regeneration" and the washing away of sins"?*

The Answer: *God speaks thus not without great cause, to wit—that means, "to know"—not only thereby to teach us that as the filth of the body is purged away by water, so our sins are removed by the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ; but especially that by this divine pledge and sign He may assure us that we are spiritually cleansed from our sins as really as we are externally washed with water.*

Question #74: *Are infants also to be baptized?*

The Answer is: *Yes, for since they, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them no less than to the adult; they must therefore by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church, and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers as was done in the old covenant or testament by circumcision, instead of which baptism is instituted in the new covenant.*

Thus far, our Heidelberg Catechism.

And so, we're going to focus tonight on *The Water of Holy Baptism*.

First of all, the Catechism says the water itself is of no spiritual effect. The water itself does not have a magic capacity. There's nothing magic about the water of baptism. Secondly, however, it symbolizes the cleansing blood of Christ. And thirdly, it yields assurance to the believer. And both of these points are addressed in Question and Answer #73, where it explains to us, again, as we already saw last week, that the water of baptism points us to the blood of Christ and its cleansing power. But also, that also the sacrament of baptism, whenever it is administered in the midst of the congregation, is given by God to not only signify the gospel, the truth of the gospel, but also to seal it to the hearts of God's children, and so, to grant them the assurance that what Christ has accomplished on the cross was also for their personal benefit. So, *The Water of Holy Baptism; It Has No Spiritual Effect; It Symbolizes the Cleansing Blood of Christ; and It Yields Assurance to the Believer*.

1. It Has No Spiritual Effect

And so, congregation, throughout the history of the church, of the New Testament church, there has always been the ever-present danger of the overestimation of baptism. And so, that the external ritual of baptism, far too often, was equated with an inward reality, as if the sacrament of

baptism itself somehow communicates to those who receive it the blessings and the graces which it symbolizes. There has always been the danger throughout church history that people had attached far too much value to their baptism. Just like many Jews attached far too much value to the fact that they were circumcised. That was Nicodemus's problem when he visited Jesus at night, as recorded for us in John chapter 3. He trusted in the fact that he was a son of Abraham. He trusted in his circumcision. He thought that his circumcision was the equivalent of being the recipient of God's favor. And then Jesus taught him powerfully that unless he was born again, he could not enter the kingdom of heaven. And that's why Paul ends that chapter which we read, by emphasizing, he is not a Jew is one outwardly, but he is a Jew who is one inwardly (Romans 2:28–29). And so throughout church history, several errors have emerged, and we are still dealing, to some extent, with these errors until this day. And so, let me just briefly address them.

So, first of all, error number one is what we call the Roman Catholic, or the Lutheran view of baptism. And both traditions, even the Lutheran church, because, as much as we are indebted to Martin Luther⁴ for the Protestant Reformation, yet, when it came to the doctrine of the sacraments, Luther could not ultimately divorce himself fully from the Roman Catholic context from which he came. And so, both traditions embrace what we call *baptismal regeneration*. What does that mean? It's a mouthful. It's that they view the sacrament of baptism as a vehicle of grace. Rather than a means of grace, it is viewed as a vehicle of grace. So what do we mean by that? That means that they believe that when baptism is administered, that by means of it, grace is actually transmitted to the one who receives it. For us, the sacraments are *means of grace*. Means of grace can only benefit us if the Holy Spirit is pleased to use those means to grant us the reality of that which the sacraments symbolize. But in the Roman Catholic tradition and the Lutheran tradition, baptism is much more than that.

And so, especially, Roman Catholicism believes that unless a child is baptized, that child can never go to heaven. So if children die in infancy who are not baptized, they go to a special abode for children, but they will never make it to heaven. And that's why, in that tradition, it's so important, even for a doctor or a nurse to baptize a child in the event that that child would die very young. I had a personal experience with this in my first congregation, where a young couple lost their child after six months of pregnancy; it only lived for a couple of hours. So I received a phone call and I immediately went to the hospital, which was a Roman Catholic hospital. And when I walked in, the nurse walked over to me, and she said, "Pastor, come here. The baby is right here, this way you can baptize it." The baby had died. I said, "Ma'am, I do not baptize dead babies. I only baptize living babies." And I could see that she was very offended by what I said. Because, you see, in her mind, even though the baby had already died, she thought that if I would still baptize that baby, that that baby would still be a recipient of the grace of God.

And sadly, this whole idea of baptismal regeneration—baptism being the means whereby grace is communicated—is still part of the Lutheran tradition as well. And so, of course, what happened is that as a result of Calvin's influence, also the teaching on the sacraments was gradually corrected, so that the Reformed church arrived at a biblical view of the sacraments, also the sacrament of baptism. As we will see in a moment, the symbolism of baptism is not insignificant. The water of baptism is not insignificant. But the water itself has no effect. The water itself, the sacrament itself, is not a vehicle of grace.

Then, of course, we have the tradition in which the whole idea is embraced that we can only baptize our children, if we presume them to be regenerate; if we presume them to be God's elect. And old Abraham Kuyper⁵ is the one who really articulated that view. And so, his view was that,

⁴ Martin Luther (1483–1546), was a German priest, theologian, author, hymn writer, professor, and former Augustinian friar, who was the seminal figure of the Protestant Reformation in Europe.

⁵ Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) was the Prime Minister of the Netherlands between 1901 and 1905, an influential neo-Calvinist minister and a journalist. He established the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

when we baptize our children, we must presume them to be regenerate, or we must presume them to be elect, unless otherwise proven. And again, the sad result of this wrong view of the sacrament of baptism, and the logic of it is simply this, that in Kuyper's mind, he really, through a back door, he was embracing a Baptist view. In his mind, he wanted to administer baptism to someone who, in his mind, was already regenerated, so that, baptism then became an affirmation of that regeneration, even though he said that that regeneration could be dormant for quite some time. And so, the view that still prevails today is that we must view our children, our baptized children, we must view them as regenerate unless otherwise proven.

And so, the problem is the same as in the Lutheran and the Roman Catholic tradition, and the problem is this, that children are raised and treated as children of God. And so, it totally negates the necessity of being born again. And that's why our Form for Baptism so powerfully and straightforwardly begins in its opening statement that unless our children are born again, they cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven. So, any view of baptism that negates the necessity of the new birth; any view of baptism that negates the necessity of repentance and faith in Christ, is a flawed view of baptism, and a flawed view of God's covenant.

And then, recently, in the last twenty years, another error emerged in the Reformed community, a view called Federal Vision. And again, I will not weary you with what that all means. There's quite a bit of information online. Several orthodox Reformed churches have addressed that view called the Federal Vision, that Covenantal Vision, and there are many documents online that would be helpful to read if you're interested, by which you could educate yourself on this. So, the URC⁶ has dealt with it, the OPC⁷ has dealt with it, the RCUS⁸ has dealt with it, and have done a very good job in addressing this.

Ultimately, it boils down to this, is they wanted to make the whole idea of God's covenant more meaningful. And it boils down to this, that they teach that when our children are baptized, they are really in the covenant, and must be viewed as such, unless, just like any other view, unless they turn away from the covenant and break their relationship. What it boils down to, without getting into details, that even in that view, again, the same problem arises, that those who hold to that view, they simply assume that those baptized children are God's children. That's why, in that tradition, you will find that they also administer the Lord's Supper to children. They practice what we call *paedocommunion*,⁹ because, after all, we must view those children as the recipients of God's grace. And so all of this, and this particular view, this Federal Vision, this covenantal view, again, it negates the necessity of personal repentance and faith in Christ. This view, also, it has been proven, is a death knell to what we call *experiential Christianity*, the necessity of experiencing in your soul the essential realities of Scripture; experiencing your lostness in sin; experiencing in your own soul the necessity of believing in the Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation. And so, all of these views have this in common, that it fosters presumption, it fosters deceit.

Now, also historically, already in the time of the Reformation, as a strong reaction to this, the movement of Anabaptism emerged. "Anabaptist" literally means "to baptize again." And so they felt that the Reformers had not gone far enough in reforming the doctrine of baptism. And so, they rejected, therefore, they rejected the idea of baptizing infants. And that's why they insisted on people being baptized again. That's what "Anabaptist" means. It needs to be understood, however, that the movement of Anabaptism, and of course, all of the Baptist churches today have their origin in that movement. That movement did not emerge until after the Reformation. And it's a reaction, it's a strong reaction, and it's remarkable, how until this day, many Baptists believe that we believe that baptized children are saved; that it automatically is assumed that our children are the recipients

⁶ URC is the United Reformed Church.

⁷ OPC is the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

⁸ RCUS is the Reformed Church in the United States.

⁹ Paedocommunion—"paedo" is the Greek word for "child", so, the practice of giving communion to children.

of God's saving grace.

And as we will see next week, the Lord's willing, when we focus on the baptism of children, is that a proper understanding of the sacrament of baptism, also, as it pertains to our children, does not negate the necessity of the new birth; does not negate the necessity of repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so, what is, then, the biblical view, the proper estimation of the water of baptism? And so, the Question is asked: *Is then the external baptism with water the washing away of sin itself?* Does that water actually accomplish that? Does that water of baptism secure the benefits of salvation? And the Answer is strong and plain. It says, *Not at all; for the blood of Jesus Christ only, and the Holy Ghost cleanse us from all sin.* And so, very simply, the water of baptism, is thus a visual symbol of a spiritual reality. Which is also the definition of a sacrament: a visual symbol of a spiritual reality.

And so, by means of the sacrament of baptism, God communicates the essential truths of the gospel. In the sacrament, God speaks; God communicates. That's very essential, as we will see next week, also when we focus on the sacrament of infant baptism. Because ultimately, baptism is not about us; baptism is not about the parents, ultimately, nor is it about the child; but baptism is first and foremost a means whereby God communicates with us; whereby God speaks; whereby God declares who he is: whereby God focuses our attention on the foundational truths of the gospel.

Even John, even though John's baptism was not New Testament baptism, because John was an Old Testament prophet, the son of a priest, and his baptism was simply the administration of a Levitical rite, a Levitical washing. But even he said, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire" (Matthew 3:11). So even John made the link between his ritual cleansing, his ritual purification rite that he performed at the Jordan River, he made the connection with the Holy Spirit, and that's a very important connection. Because, congregation, that's what the sacrament of baptism ultimately signifies. And that's why, throughout the New Testament, you will always see a connection between the sacrament of baptism and between the work of the Holy Spirit. It signifies, and seals, and symbolizes his renewing, his cleansing work, his cleansing ministry. And so, even John's baptism, though in some ways a forerunner of the New Testament sacrament of baptism, which was not instituted until after the resurrection, just before Christ ascended, even that already made that connection, John made that connection. He said, "What I am doing here physically, the one who comes after me, he will do this by his Spirit."

And that's why sprinkling is such a very important component of baptism. Sprinkling, the whole idea of the practice of sprinkling, is literally—no pun intended—is sprinkled all through the Word of God. Countless passages, especially in the Old Testament, where this word is used. And so, in Ezekiel 36, where we have a description of the marvelous work of regeneration, we read in verse 25: "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you." And so, the mode of sprinkling powerfully illustrates the work of the Holy Spirit. The mode of sprinkling is a mode that communicates that the grace of God comes from a source outside of me, and is being applied to the subject. And so, it beautifully symbolizes exactly what is described for us here in Ezekiel 36.

2. It Symbolizes the Cleansing Blood of Christ

But let's move on to our second point, because, even though it has no spiritual effect, yet, *It Symbolizes the Cleansing Blood of Christ.* And so, not only do we have to guard against the overestimation of baptism, we also have to guard against the underestimation of baptism. Again, which is one of the reasons why our forefathers have given us a Form, so that we, as it says in the Form, that we would not do this out of form or custom, or merely tradition, so that we do not

underestimate the sacrament of baptism. So, *Why then*, is the Question, *Why then doth the Holy Ghost call baptism “the washing of regeneration” and the “washing away of sins?”*

First of all, the language of Scripture is remarkable indeed. And so, the Question emphasizes, first of all, it emphasizes that the authors, of course, were wholly committed to the doctrines of inspiration. And so, they’re saying, “Where do we get this terminology from?” We get this terminology from the Word of God. It is the Holy Ghost who calls baptism “the washing of regeneration” and the “washing away of sins”.

Turn with me for a moment to Titus 3, verse 5. There, Paul writes this: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.” Now, the word translated “washing” could be translated as “laver.” And so, it’s a reference to the Old Testament laver, the laver which stood in the courtyard filled with water, which symbolized the necessity of cleansing. Not only was there an altar to deal with the guilt of sin, there was a laver to deal with the filth of sin, with the pollution of sin. And so, “the washing of regeneration.” And again, and this is, as we find often, of course, especially the Apostle Paul, the Apostle Paul knew the Scripture so very well. It was part and parcel of him. This is a reference to the Old Testament baptisms that the book of Hebrews talks about; the Old Testament baptisms which were those cleansing and purification rites; those rites that were administered either by sprinkling or pouring; those rites, those cleansing rites, by which God taught the people of Israel, in countless ways, that they were unclean because of sin, that they needed to be cleansed. That’s why, when somebody was inaugurated into the priesthood, they could not begin until they were cleansed, until they were washed, until they were purified, to impress upon them, that, as sinners, they were unfit to do the work to which God called them. And then, of course, they would be anointed with oil as well.

And so, that’s why the reason John was John the Baptist, because he was the son of Zachariah the baptist. He was the oldest son of a priest. All of the priests were baptizers. All of the priests would perform the ritual of cleansing and purification. And so, John, when he did his baptisms, simply did what he was taught. And that’s why, of course, the scribes and Pharisees, they sent a committee to check him out, because they did not know that he was the son of a priest. They did not know that he could do legitimately what he was doing. And so, they asked him for his credentials. “Who are you? Are you the Messiah?”

And so, now to get back here to this language here, so “the washing of regeneration.” And then, in Acts 22, verse 16—and Paul, of course, is recounting his own conversion; he’s recounting Ananias visiting him; he’s giving an account of his conversion—and he says, “And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized.” This is Ananias speaking, of course, “Arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” Now, sometimes this is misread. And there have been those, who, until this day, believe that baptism secures the forgiveness of sins. And of course, as our dear friend, Dr. Barrett, often said, “Scripture cannot mean what it cannot mean.” It cannot mean here that Paul is saying that baptism itself resulted in the washing away of his sins. But what he’s emphasizing here, and Ananias is the rich symbolism of it. Because, if you read that sentence correctly, also in the original text, it says here, “Be baptized, and wash away thy sins by calling on the name of the Lord.” So in other words, what that means is that Paul obtained the washing away of his sins, not by his baptism, but by the very fact that he called upon the name of the Lord, in other words, by the fact that he put his trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore, obtained the forgiveness of his sins.

Turn with me for a moment to the Book of Acts, Acts 2, verse 38, because there is another passage where we have that same connection. This is at the end of Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, where, in response to the question of the multitude, “What shall we do?” Peter says, in verse 38, “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” (By the way,

notice right here how Peter makes the connection between baptism and between the Holy Spirit.) But what's Peter saying here? Peter is not saying that baptism will secure the remission of sins. No, when he tells them to submit to the New Testament sacrament of baptism, which was administered for the first time on the day of Pentecost, he is saying that, by submitting to baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, they thereby acknowledged that they believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. That was huge for those Jews. They were all circumcised Jews. And by submitting to the sacrament of baptism administered here for the first time in the New Testament, thereby they were embracing the Lord Jesus Christ whom Peter had preached. And so, what it boils down to, what Peter is saying in verse 38, Repent and believe the gospel, the gospel that is set forth also in the sacrament of baptism, which was, of course, entirely new, also for those Jewish believers.

And so, what is the powerful symbolism of the water of baptism? It points, as we already saw last week, so I can be rather brief here. It points to our double problem, the double problem we have as sinners. And the double problem is that we are guilty, and we are filthy. Remember how those two words rhyme. We are guilty, that means we are worthy of punishment. But it also pollutes us, it makes us vile. Sin corrupts us—guilty and filthy. And so, I'm going to tell you a little story, especially for the boys and girls, and hopefully, this will help parents to explain these very important truths to your children. What does it mean that we are guilty and that we are filthy? This is a story from my own history. And I don't think I've told this story here, but if I did, it bears repeating.

So this is when I was only six years old, and my brother was three years old, and we lived in Rotterdam. We lived in a high-rise building, and we had severe rain and severe flooding. And the whole neighborhood was under water. And my three-year-old brother was a rather adventurous fellow, and he was looking outside, and he thought, "There's this massive swimming pool." And somehow my mother got wind of what his intentions were, and she warned him, she said, "Don't you dare go outside." But my brother did not listen. He went outside. And then, the neighbor brought him back. And she rang the doorbell, and she said, "Mrs. Elshout, do you know this boy?" She said, "I think I do." And he was covered with mud, and he was soaking wet. And so, when he came into the house, my little brother had a double problem. He was guilty because he had disobeyed by mother. And because he was guilty, he had to be punished. But he was also filthy. His disobedience made him also filthy. He was guilty and he was filthy. So he had to be punished for what he did for not listening, but he also had to be washed, and he had to receive a new set of clothes. So he was guilty and filthy. He had a double problem.

And that's exactly our double problem. When we sin, we are worthy of judgment. And when we sin, we corrupt ourselves, we pollute ourselves. The beauty of baptism is that it points us to the power of the blood of Christ. It points us, that that precious blood that Christ shed addresses our guilt, and it addresses our filth. That precious blood removes from us the guilt, the guilt of our sins.

There's a beautiful verse in Revelation 1, verse 5, where John writes—after this is the greeting that I often use in the morning—"And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood." So that blood, that precious blood to which the water of baptism points, that precious blood secures the justification of the believer. And so, God wants to remind his people every time baptism is administered; he wants to remind us by means of that visible sign, that this is what the blood of Christ accomplishes. It washes us from our sins in his own blood, and it removes the corruption of sin; it removes the pollution of sin. What a blessed truth, and what a blessed reality that is.

We need to be reminded of that over and over again. Because, even though, when the Spirit of God regenerates us, and the Spirit dwells in us, we have to deal with our corruption with our sin until our dying day. It is true that God's children no longer live as they did before. Before our conversion—this is not original with me, but I like to say it—before our conversion, we pursued

sin; and after conversion, sin pursues us. That's the difference. That's the difference, and it remains a painful reality. And that's why, so very often God's children groan the prayer of Psalm 65, that a stream of foul transgression prevails against me from day to day (verse 3). That's why we need to hear the gospel daily. That's why, as one author said, ultimately, when we begin the day, we need to preach the gospel to ourselves. We need to remind ourselves of the essential truths of the gospel, that if God should mark our iniquity, we could not stand. But with him, there is forgiveness that he may be feared (Psalm 130:3–4). And the sacrament of baptism communicates that; it communicates the preciousness and the power of that blood. That's why it says here, *God speaks thus not without great cause, to wit, not only thereby to teach us that as the filth of the body is purged away by water, so our sins are removed by the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ.*

3. It Yields Assurance to the Believer

And so, that precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ guarantees the justification and the sanctification of the believer. Those two inseparable truths, those two sides of one coin. And so, then God saves a sinner, he justifies him and sanctifies him. That means he pardons from sin, and through his Spirit, then cleanses us from sin, and conforms us, slowly but surely to the image of Christ. That's why, it says in Isaiah 40, that's why we are called to proclaim to God's children, Remember, you have received double for all your sins, because we have a double problem. But in Christ, God has provided a double remedy. In Christ there is full and complete pardon and cleansing.

And so, in 1 John 1, verse 7, we have that passage, so very familiar to all of us: “And the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin.” And of course, this would only be valuable, the sacraments are only valuable to those who embrace this by faith. That's why it's so important to teach that the sacraments are not vehicles of grace. They do not automatically communicate grace. Even with the Lord's Supper, just because we sit at the Lord's table, does not mean that we are necessarily a recipient of God's grace. It is only by faith that we benefit from the sacraments.

And so, who benefits from the wonderful communication, the visible communication of the invisible truths of the gospel?—those, who by the Spirit of God are taught who they are and who they remain in themselves. The Spirit of God, who by his indwelling presence, is always convicting God's children of their sin, of their indwelling corruption. Why?—because it is his desire that, time and again, we would look outside of ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ; that time and again, we would rest in him alone. And then, you see, even the sacrament of baptism becomes so very precious.

And so, it is God's desire to communicate the gospel as clearly as possible. I emphasized that several times, and you see that here too: *But especially*, it says, *that by this divine pledge and sign He may assure us that we are spiritually cleansed from our sins as really as we are externally washed with water.* There's this beautiful passage in Zechariah 13, verse 1, again, a passage with which we're all so familiar, where we read, “In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem”—now listen carefully, in light of what we have said tonight—“for sin and for uncleanness”—sin and uncleanness. And in 1 John 1, it says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (verse 9)—pardon and cleansing. The removal of guilt and filth, all of that is embodied in the Person and in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so, God's objective, through the preaching of his Word, and also through the administration of the sacraments, is to grant his children the assured confidence that this is also their portion. Sometimes we are afraid that we are claiming something that is not ours. “Is this also intended for me? Is this also for me? May I take hold of this?” That's why God stoops so low, that's why he comes to near to us, by means of the sacraments, as if to say, “My dear child, I want you to understand that your salvation is as real as what you are seeing here with your eyes. I want you to

know that it is really, really true, that if you put your trust in my Son, that I fully pardon you from all of your sins; it is really, really true, that his blood, the blood of my Son, of my beloved Son, cleanses from all sin.” Because why? Because the God of salvation, the God who has loved you with an everlasting love, the God who gave his Son to secure your redemption, that God so desires that you would live in the enjoyment of that salvation. He so desires that you would be assured of what his Son has accomplished in your place.

I think of the wonderful words of Isaiah 1, verse 18, that are so applicable to the sacraments as well. “Come now,” says the Lord, “Come now, and let us reason together...though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” And reverently speaking, in the sacraments, God reasons with his people. He’s saying, “Come, look, look at these visible signs. Look at that water, look at that bread, look at that wine, and come, let us reason together. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

You see, the bottom line question is, have you and I, have we embraced the gospel unveiled to us, also in baptism? Has what God signifies, what he sets before us, what he unveils, have we embraced it by faith? Because God forbid, as I said last week, God forbid that any of us would drown in the water of baptism. Again, that’s not original with me; our forefather often spoke of this. And so, boys and girls, as we will see next week, when you did not even know you existed, God already communicated the gospel even to you. God declares, and has sworn by his own name, that he’s willing and able to be your God. And he wants you to grow up being taught this by us, so that you will understand the gospel. I just read this afternoon in one author that said, because the water of baptism will never dry up. That’s why, that’s what our forefathers meant, that if you live under those gospel privileges, if you live under the preaching of the gospel your whole life, having had the incredible privilege of receiving the sign and seal of God’s covenant in your infancy, and yet, to die in your sins, you will drown in the waters of baptism, and your baptism will even testify against you forever.

But now, now is the accepted time. Now is the day of salvation. And so, the question for me and for you is, does, what baptism signifies and seals, is that for you and me a personal and experiential reality? Amen.

Let’s pray.

Gracious God in heaven, we give thee thanks for the gift of thy Word but also the gift of the sacraments, by which thou dost affirm the essential and foundational truths and promises of the gospel. And Lord, how encouraging it is to be reminded repeatedly of the power of the blood of Christ, that precious blood that removes the guilt of sin, but also the filth of sin; that precious blood, which is a double remedy for our double need. O what a precious Savior we have, who has accomplished all of this by his sacrifice. O that we would examine our hearts whether we already, by grace, are the beneficiaries of this; whether we, as poor and guilty undone sinners, guilty and filthy, have taken our refuge to this precious Christ, so willing, so able, so qualified to save us to the uttermost. Go with us now as we go to our homes. Go with us in this coming week. Bless us as we engage in our daily calling. Bless us as parents as we seek to shepherd our children. Bless our family worship. Bless our children in school. And grant that we may meet to gather also next Lord’s Day, and hear us only for Christ’s sake. Amen.