

A New View of the Covenant Creeping in Largely Unnoticed

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A new view of the covenant of God that made its appearance over twenty years ago has reappeared in the preaching and writing of men who have a reputation for being champions of the Reformed Faith.¹ This view is such a radical paradigm shift that it can affect every aspect of one's understanding of God and salvation. The focus of this new view is on what its adherents call "the objectivity of the covenant." As one has said: "Membership in the covenant is objective. It can be photographed."²

According to their teaching, being baptized into the organized church is equivalent to entering into the covenant of God. Therefore, entering the covenant is objective and can be photographed. For them, to be in the visible church is to be "in Christ." So, they say, by water-baptism God incorporates a person into Christ and, being "in Christ," from that moment God promises that person all the blessings of the salvation that are in Christ — regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification — unless he should apostatize and be excommunicated, at which time he would no longer be "in Christ" and therefore would lose the salvation he did in fact possess so long as he was a member of the organized church. They teach that, since Christ is "the elect one," a person's union with Christ by water-baptism proves that person is also one of the elect of God. Thus, in their view, excommunication makes a baptized person no longer one of the elect, since he is no longer "in Christ." According to their teaching, God promises all who are baptized the blessings of salvation, but of a salvation that can be lost after it has been possessed. This

¹ See Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2000); Douglas Wilson, *Reformed is Not Enough* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2002); and the lectures given at the AAPC Pastors Conference in Monroe, Louisiana in the winter of 2002.

² Douglas Wilson, "Stumbling into Apostasy," *Credenda Agenda*, Vol. 13, Number 2, 16.

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means, if we follow their view, that divine election and divine reprobation are not irreversible.³

Therefore, according to this new view, in the New Testament's teaching on the covenant of God, election can be possessed and lost; union with Christ can be possessed and lost; "baptismal regeneration" can be possessed and lost; justification, adoption and sanctification can be possessed and lost. This means that the promise of God to save from sin those who are baptized is an empty and ineffective promise that can fail to be realized. Hence, "the objectivity of the covenant" should be renamed "the externality of the covenant," resembling aspects of Roman Catholicism and Arminianism.⁴

This new view of "the objectivity of the covenant" goes off track by failing to keep clear two Biblical distinctions: first, the distinction between the corporate election of Israel as a nation (in the Old Testament) and the soteric⁵ election of individuals in Christ (in both Testaments) and, second, the distinction between being baptized into the organized church and being incorporated into Christ.

THE THEOCRATIC ELECTION OF ISRAEL AS A NATION⁶

In the Old Testament, Israel was chosen by Jehovah nationally to receive special privileges and to be set apart from all the nations of the world for the purpose of bringing salvation to the world in the Messiah. What made this calling such a high privilege was that the people of Israel **were entrusted with the oracles of God**, i.e., the oracular, revelatory words of the Lord, Romans 3:2. Israel's election was, according to John Murray, "unto separation from all other nations that Israel might be holy and a people for God's own possession, Psalm 33:12;

³ "When the reprobate [i.e., non-elect], turn in repentance and faith, they are no longer looked upon as reprobate but as elect..."- Norman Shepherd, *The Banner*, March 28, 1980, 19. "Reprobation from within the context of the covenant., that is to say, reprobation from the point of view of the covenant is not incontrovertible."- Norman Shepherd, *Reprobation in Covenant Perspective: The Biblical Doctrine*, 12.

⁴ See also Deuteronomy 4:37; 7:6,7; 10:15; 14:2; I Kings 3:8; Psalm 33:12; 76:1,2; 105:6,43; 135:4; Isaiah 41:8,9; 43:20-22; 44:1; 31:3,4; Hosea 11:1; Amos 3:2; Malachi 1:2.

⁵ Soteric is an adjective from the noun, soteriology, which is the study of the doctrine of salvation as effected by Jesus Christ. Therefore, "soteric election" denotes an election that eternally saves the elected person. Salvific has the same denotation as soteric.

⁶ The following information is based largely on John Murray's article on "Elect, Election" in the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 270-274.

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135:4, a people formed for Himself to show forth His praise, Isaiah 43:1,7,21.”⁷
Murray further states:

The election of Israel was the channel through which God was pleased to administer His saving grace and in the fullness of time fulfill His redemptive purpose for all nations, Genesis 12:3; 22:18. Within this context Christ came, Romans 1:3; 9:5; Galatians 4:4.⁸

However, this theocratic election of the nation of Israel did not guarantee either the eternal salvation of the nation or of all the individuals within that nation. Therefore, it is to be distinguished from the particularized and soteric election of individuals within the nation to eternal life, which doctrine is taught in the Old Testament, I Kings 19:18; Psalm 95:8-11; Isaiah 1:9; 10:22,23, as well as in the New Testament, Ephesians 1:3f; Romans 9:22; John 15:16. As the apostle Paul said in Romans 9:6—**they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel**, or, “not all *in* Israel were *of* Israel.”⁹ (See Romans 9:6, 7-13; 11:7-10; and Hebrews 4:2-7.) Not all those who were citizens in the elect nation of Israel were individually elected by God to eternal salvation. Among all those Israelites who were elected for service, some were elected for eternal salvation. In Elijah’s day, only **seven thousand** in Israel were of Israel, I Kings 19:18. There were only **a few survivors** in Isaiah’s day, Isaiah 1:9. And only **a remnant** returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian Captivity, Isaiah 10:21.

Although closely related to some aspects of the theocratic election, election to eternal salvation is distinct from Israel’s election “in that it (i.e., soteric election) insures the salvation of its objects and distinct from Christ’s election in that the latter is not to salvation, but to office [of mediator] for the accomplishing of salvation [of those elected by God to salvation].¹⁰ In the Old Testament much

⁷ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁹ John Murray’s point in this paragraph refutes Norman Shepherd’s claim, as stated by O. Palmer Robertson, that “it is improper to distinguish in the covenant between an externally organized covenant community that includes non-elected and unsaved people and an internal group of people that are elected and saved. All in the covenant community are elected and saved.”- Dr. Robertson makes this statement in his unpublished paper, *Norman Shepherd’s “Covenant Perspective:” An Analysis of His Public Statements*. Shepherd’s own words can be found in his paper, *The Covenant Context for Evangelism*, 64f. This is a paper presented on May 19, 1975 and subsequently printed in *The New Testament Student and Theology, Vol. III*, edited by John H. Skilton (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976), 51-75.

¹⁰ Therefore, it is inaccurate to say that those baptized into union with Christ are the elect of God because Christ was the elect of God, and they are in Him. Christ’s “election” by the Father was to the office of Mediator of the New Covenant. Our “election” in Christ is to eternal salvation in Christ. Hence, baptism is not proof of election. John Barach says the opposite: “But how do you

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emphasis falls on ethnic [theocratic] election [because of its prophetic expectation of the Messiah from Israel]. In the New Testament ethnic election recedes into the background and the terms ‘elect’ and ‘election,’ when the action of God in reference to men is in view, are used with few exceptions (Acts 13:17; Romans 11:28) of election unto life and salvation.”¹¹

As privileged as ancient Israel was to be nationally elected by God, that theocratic election, as her theocratic adoption, was inferior to the soteric election and adoption of individuals in Christ. For example, not all those in the theocratically elected nation of Israel were soterically elected to eternal life. In Romans 9:3-5, we learn that among the privileges granted to ancient Israel because of her “theocratic election,” was the privilege of **the adoption of sons**, the Father-son relationship between God and Israel established by God’s grace. This “theocratic adoption” of Old Testament Israel is to be distinguished from the “soteric adoption” spoken of in the New Testament as the zenith of privilege in the New Covenant in Christ, Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5; John 1:12; I John 3:1.

This difference is apparent from Galatians 4:3-5, where our adoption in Christ is contrasted with the relation of Israel to God in the Old Testament—**So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.** Israel could be said to be the **children** of God, but in a lesser and lower sense than Christians in the New Testament. The adoption secured by Christ in the fullness of time, 4:4, is a mature, full-fledged sonship in contrast with the “childhood” of Israel in the Old Testament. Although, according to Romans 9:3-5, Israel had been adopted nationally by God, Galatians 4:5-7 tells us that God sent Christ to them, **(those who were under the Law)**, in order that “**we**,” i.e., Paul and his Jewish relatives, might receive “**adoption**” in a higher and fuller, soteric sense as explained in the New Testament, John 1:12. Though adopted nationally, Israel still stood in the position of a **slave** before God, and only in the adoption we have in and

know that God chose you? ...The answer is that you’ve had the special experience. You’ve been baptized. ...At baptism, God promises that you’re really one of His elect. ...Doubting your election when God has promised it to you is sin.” – John Barach, “Baptism and Election”, 2002, <<http://www.messiahnyc.org/article.php?sid=162>> (20 November 2002). Steven Wilkins agrees with Barach in his lecture, *The Legacy of the Half-Way Covenant*, delivered at the Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference, Winter, 2002.

¹¹ Murray, 271.

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through Christ did Jewish believers come to full sonship and heirship. The same can be said about Israel's national election. It is lesser and lower in nature than the election of God's people in Christ to full and eternal adoption into the salvific family of God.

THE SOTERIC ELECTION OF INDIVIDUALS IN CHRIST

In Romans 9:11, referring to soteric election, we find these words: **...in order that God's purpose according to His choice [election] might stand...** This phrase cannot mean anything less than that God's electing purpose shall stand permanently. "The thought is the security and inviolability of the purpose entailed in election...the end contemplated in election cannot fail of realization."¹² Therefore soteric election, unlike Israel's theocratic election, is immutable and irreversible.

Jesus made the point that the elect must be saved eternally, when He said, concerning the fall of Jerusalem, that **unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days shall be cut short**, Matthew 24:22. Jesus also assured His disciples that all the elect would be gathered to Him, when He said: **And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other**, Matthew 24:31. Murray continues:

Since election involves [God's] determinate purpose it is impossible to conceive of this purpose as defeated and the purpose must be one correspondent with the grace of election itself. This is the tenor of various passages... elected to be holy, Ephesians 1:4, predestinated unto adoption, 1:5, chosen unto salvation, II Thessalonians 2:13. The purpose according to which calling takes place, Romans 8:28, is the one that issues in glorification, 8:30.

The security of the elect is the theme of Romans 8:33-39. The triumphant conclusion of vv. 38,39 is continuous with and the climax to the series of questions that begins with **who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect**, v. 33.

The **vessels of mercy**, Romans 9:23, are, by reason of the context, to be identified with the elect (cf. v. 11) and they are said to be **afore**

¹² *Ibid.*, 272.

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prepared unto glory in contrast with the **vessels of wrath fitted unto destruction**, vs. 22 ASV.¹³

Soteric election is “in Christ” — **...He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world...**, Ephesians 1:4.¹⁴ John Murray gives us a careful explanation of the meaning and implications of being “elected in Christ:”

God the Father is the subject of election; it is His distinguishing action and He who initiates the whole process of salvation. This action of the Father may not be dissociated from Christ nor conceived of apart from Him. ...it is of the essence of our faith in the Father’s electing grace to know that in the fount of salvation the elect were never contemplated apart from Christ, that union with Christ was constituted in the decree of election. The people of God prize the mediation of Christ in all phases of redemption accomplished and applied. They should also prize the relation of Christ constituted in eternal election.

The election in Christ must be construed in messianic terms and as relevant to the economy of salvation. This economy has its source in election and election is unto salvation of its objects. It would be proper, therefore, to infer that Christ is contemplated in His messianic identity when it is said that the elect were chosen in Him. Election must not be thought of apart from the salvation which it insures, and salvation is inconceivable apart from Christ.

No phase of salvation is more basic or central than union with Christ. The redeemed died and arose with Christ when He died and arose, Romans 6:2-6. At the inception of salvation in possession is the call of the Father into the fellowship of Christ, I Corinthians 1:9. It is in Christ we have the forgiveness of sins and are justified, Romans 8:1; Ephesians 1:7. In Him we are given an inheritance and in Him sealed with the Holy Spirit as the earnest of the inheritance, Ephesians 1:11, 13, 14. In Christ believers die and they are dead in Christ, I Thessalonians 4:14, 16. In Christ they will be resurrected, I Corinthians 15:22. Together with Christ they will be glorified, Romans 8:17.

Election in Christ before the foundation of the world is the assurance given us that this union with Christ in all its aspects and in the richness

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Repeatedly in Ephesians 1:1-14, Paul speaks of our union in Christ, 1:1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13.

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of its grace has its source in a union constituted before times eternal. All spiritual blessing bestowed is in accordance with this election in Christ and flows from it. No spiritual blessing can be regarded as the precondition of election in Christ; every such blessing is its fruit.

The pivotal passage, Ephesians 1:4, has no precise parallel. It may be that Romans 8:29 expresses what is intended by election in Christ. If this is so, then 'predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son' defines the import of 'in Christ' and the purpose of the latter is to inform us that election had not been conceived of or determined by God the Father except in terms of the end to which it was directed, namely, conformity to the image of the Father's only begotten. It can be said that this would provide a sufficient reason for the terms of Ephesians 1:4. In any case, Romans 8:29 informs us of what is implied in the election in Christ and, if it is not intended as a definition, no other text is comparably rich in setting forth what is involved. For conformity to the image of God's Son that He might be the firstborn among many brethren is the highest conceivable destiny for creatures.¹⁵

The point of this discussion is simply this: election as it is explained in the New Testament is soteric election that infallibly causes the person elected to receive all the blessings of the eternal salvation to which he was elected. It is not dependent upon anything in the elect, nor can it be reversed. Hence, not all who are baptized are the elect, for not all baptized people go to heaven when they die. Furthermore, the phrase "in Christ" is not to be identified with membership in the organized church by baptism; nor does it denote some external covenant membership by a baptized unbeliever. When a person is "in Christ," he or she eternally possesses all the eternal, and therefore unlosable, benefits of salvation that are applied to us by virtue of our being in union and communion with Christ.¹⁶

Murray's explanation of the meaning of union with Christ as it pertains to election refutes Norman Shepherd's claim that Ephesians 1 is concerned with "covenant election," and that it "functions as canon only within the context of

¹⁵ Murray, 272-273.

¹⁶ Over against this view is that of Douglas Wilson and the others who hold to this new view of covenant objectivity: "So there is such a thing as genuine covenantal connection to Christ which is not salvific at the last day."- *Reformed is Not Enough*, 133. Wilson's and Shepherd's interpretation of the vine and branches parable of John 15 also represents this new view. See Appendix: *An Expository Sketch of John 15* at the conclusion of this paper.

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the covenant.”¹⁷ In the light of the new view of the objectivity of the covenant, this means that: “Since the election of Ephesians 1 is ‘covenant election,’ and since ‘covenant election’ may become reprobation, the election of Ephesians 1 may become reprobation. In this case, it is not simply that it must be concluded that these people never were elect, for according to observable covenant reality, which is the perspective of Scripture, they are indeed elect.”¹⁸ Shepherd’s view at this point flies in the face of the express statement of I John 2:18-19—**Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen; from this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us.** Shepherd’s own words are these: “It is true, some [of the ‘elect’ of Ephesians 1] may fall away, and Paul warns against that possibility. Were some to fall away, he would no longer speak of them as the elect of God.”¹⁹ In other words, according to Shepherd, but contrary to the New Testament, divine election is not immutable and irreversible.

BAPTISM AND UNION WITH CHRIST

The new view on the objectivity of the covenant includes a doctrine of baptism that approaches that of Roman Catholicism. It holds that by water-baptism a person is brought by God into union with Christ as the source of his promised salvation. Therefore union with Christ, being described by this view as a covenantal union, is an objective relationship—being “in Christ” is being in the organized church; hence it is not only an objective-external relationship, it is a conceivably losable relationship.

The questions we must go to the Bible to answer are these: What does “union with Christ” signify? How does a person come to be in union with Christ? What is the relation of our union in Christ and water-baptism?

First, what does “union with Christ” signify? John Murray answers:

Union with Christ is a very inclusive subject. It embraces the wide span of salvation from its ultimate source in the eternal election of God to its final fruition in the glorification of the elect. It is not simply a phase of

¹⁷ Shepherd in his paper *The Covenant Context for Evangelism*, 65 (see footnote 9.)

¹⁸ Robertson, 5.

¹⁹ Shepherd, 64.

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the application of redemption; it underlies every aspect of redemption both in its accomplishment and in its application. Union with Christ binds all together and insures that to all for whom Christ has purchased redemption He effectively applies and communicates the same.²⁰

Our concern is with our union with Christ as a vital aspect of the application of redemption, which is the work of the Holy Spirit, Ephesians 1:13-14. Although a person has been chosen in Christ before the creation of the universe, Ephesians 1:4, and redeemed by the death of Christ two thousand years ago, Galatians 3:13, he does not become an actual recipient of the benefits of that salvation until they are effectively applied to him by the Holy Spirit of God. Only when he is brought into fellowship with the Son of God, I Corinthians 1:9, does he actually enjoy the blessings of eternal redemption.

The point is that this vital union with Christ, that is the source of all the riches of salvation applied to us by the Spirit, is the creation of the Spirit of Christ Himself, Romans 8:9-11; I John 3:24; 4:13. We are “in Christ” and Christ is “in us,” if Christ’s Spirit dwells in us. He is the bond of this union we have with Christ. This means that this union is of “an intensely Spiritual character consonant with the nature and work of the Holy Spirit so that in a real way surpassing our power of analysis Christ dwells in His people and His people dwell in Him.”²¹ It most certainly is not an external reality that can, as quoted earlier, be photographed!²²

This vital and Spiritual union with Christ begins when a regenerated person (whose faith even then is a fruit of his regeneration by the Spirit) believes in Jesus Christ. And, with faith in Christ, the union continues, Ephesians 3:7; John 14:23; Galatians 3:26, 27, 28. Robert L. Dabney writes, “First: God embraces us with His electing and renewing love; and we then embrace Him by the actings of our faith, so that the union is consummated on both sides.”²³ The point is that union with Christ involves a reciprocal action. Christ, by His Spirit, unites us to Himself by regenerating us and thus producing faith in us. At that moment, writes Louis Berkhof, the believer enters into this union and communion with Christ “by a conscious act of faith, and continues the union,

²⁰ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955, 1980), 165.

²¹ Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 166.

²² See footnote 2.

²³ Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (1878; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 615.

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under the influence of the Holy Spirit, by the constant exercise of faith, John 14:23; 15:4,5; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 3:17.”²⁴

All this indicates that “every believer is personally united directly to Christ. The representation that the life which is in the Church through Christ flows from the Church into the individual believer is decidedly unscriptural, not only in its sacramentarian but also in its pantheistic form (Rome, Schleiermacher, and many modern theologians). Every sinner who is regenerated is directly connected with Christ and receives his life from Him,” continues Berkhof.²⁵ The sacerdotal view, that holds that union with Christ is something “objective” which is given to all those who receive water-baptism, “completely loses sight of the fact that the sacraments cannot effect this union, because they already presuppose it.”²⁶

This Spiritual union of believers with Christ is the foundation for Spiritual unity of all believers as the communion of saints, the body of Christ. We are created in Christ by the same Spirit, John 17:20,21; Acts 2:42; Romans 12:15; Ephesians 4:2,3; Colossians 3:16; I Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11; Hebrews 3:13; 10:24,25; James 5:16; I John 1:3,7.

Water baptism is a sign and seal of this union and communion we have with Christ, Genesis 17:7f; Romans 6:3-6; I Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27,28; Colossians 2:11,12. “It is because believers are united to Christ in the efficacy of his death, in the power of his resurrection, and in the fellowship of his grace that they are one body. They are united to Christ and therefore to one another. Of this union baptism is the sign and seal.”²⁷

The New Testament often uses the phrase, **baptized into**. The ascending Jesus Christ commanded His apostles to make the world’s nations His disciples, **baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit**, Matthew 28:19. Believers are said to be **baptized into Christ**, Galatians 3:27, **baptized into His death**, Romans 6:3, and **baptized into one body**, I Corinthians 12:13. The Old Testament believers were **baptized into Moses**, I Corinthians 10:2. And the Corinthian Christians were not **baptized into the name of Paul**, I Corinthians 1:13. Being **baptized into** is a way of

²⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), 450.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 450-451.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 452.

²⁷ John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962), 6.

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expressing *union with*. To be **baptized into Moses** is to be united and bonded to Moses in the fellowship of that covenant of which he was the mediator. To be **baptized into Christ** is not a reference to the mode of baptism, but rather it denotes being united to Christ “in the bonds of that union that makes us the beneficiaries of all the blessings of redemption and pledges us to His Lordship. The rite of baptism is the sign and seal of that union.”²⁸ “Our faith receives from baptism the advantage of its sure testimony to us that we are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united to Christ Himself that we become sharers in all His blessings.”²⁹

Murray writes:

We may say then that baptism signifies union with Christ in the virtue of his death and the power of his resurrection, purification from the defilement of sin by the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit, and purification from the guilt of sin by the sprinkling of the blood of Christ. The emphasis must be placed, however, upon union with Christ.³⁰

The apostle Paul writes in Galatians 3:26-27, **For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ.** This text makes three important points that help us understand what the Bible means by the phrase “baptized into Christ” and its relation to faith and baptism.

First, we are adopted into God’s family through faith in Jesus Christ—**for you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.** Faith, not baptism, is the means of that adoption, as Galatians 3:26 and John 1:12 make unmistakably clear. Grace is the cause and basis of our adoption; faith is the instrumental means that receives the gift of adoption. Therefore, as soon as a person believes in Jesus Christ, in that very moment he is adopted into God’s family, whether that is before or after his baptism with water.

Second, we are adopted into God’s family by virtue of our union with Jesus Christ—**For all of you...were baptized into Christ...** Paul can speak of our being **baptized into Christ** and of **clothing ourselves with Christ** or our **putting on Christ** as a garment. To be “baptized into Christ” is to be made

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 29f.

²⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV, xv, 6.

³⁰ Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 8.

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one with Christ, to be brought into union and communion with Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ. When that takes place by God's grace, it has a transforming effect on us. "To put on Christ' is to become as Christ, to have His standing in this context to become objects of the divine favor, sons of God, as He is the Son of God."³¹ Martin Luther writes,

The putting on of Christ, according to the gospel, consists not in an imitation, but in a new birth, and a new creation; that is to say, in putting on Christ's innocency, His righteousness, His wisdom, His power, His saving health, His life, and His Spirit. – Wherefore to be appareled with Christ...[is to be appareled]...with an incomparable gift; that is to say, with remission of sins, righteousness, peace, consolation, joy of spirit, salvation, life and Christ Himself.³²

John Calvin makes this additional observation of the language in our text:

Jesus Christ is our apparel or raiment, whereby all is covered and buried that might make us to be rejected at God's hand, and grace is purchased unto us so as He does not anymore sift us and search us in ourselves, but accepts us as if we came in the very person of His own Son."³³

Third, our union with Christ is signified and sealed to us by water baptism. By faith we are so intimately, spiritually, mystically, vitally and eternally united to Christ, that, in God's sight, we "bear the name and character of Christ, and are viewed in Him rather than in [ourselves]."³⁴ Because God has freely bestowed grace on us **in the Beloved**, Ephesians 1:6, we are accepted with God **in the Beloved**. Our lives as believers are **hidden with Christ in God**, Colossians 3:3. And it is this relationship that is signified and sealed to believers by water-baptism. We are brought into union with Christ by the Spirit, adopted into God's family and clothed with Christ in the moment in which we believe in Christ. And these things are signified and sealed to us by the Spirit of God in water-baptism.

...when Saint Paul speaks of baptism, he presupposes that we receive the thing that is offered to us in it. Many that are baptized do wipe away the grace of God: and notwithstanding that it be offered them,

³¹ Ernest De Witt Burton, *Galatians, ICC* (1921; reprint, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1968), 203.

³² Martin Luther, *Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1979), 221-222.

³³ John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians* (1574; reprint, Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publishing), 483.

³⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on Galatians, Vol. XXI* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 110.

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yet they make themselves unworthy of it through their unbelief, lewdness and rebellion.... And so the thing that makes us God's children and clothed us with Jesus Christ, is that God draws us out of the corruption wherein we were by nature, and will have Jesus Christ to be our head, and us ingrafted into Him to be partakers of His goods. Therefore look when we receive that, then is all accomplished that is figured by baptism.... [For as much as God has] knit us into the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are no more considered in our own kind, neither does God look what we are of ourselves, nor what we have deserved: but accepts us as if Jesus Christ were in us, as in deed we must not be separated from Him.³⁵

Romans 6:3-5 corroborates Galatians 3:26-27—**Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection...**

Romans 6:2 says that the reason the true believer in Jesus is not a slave to sin is because he has **died** in some sense. This verb is in the aorist tense, denoting a once-for-all happening in past time, a once-for-all breach with sin. It happened once and was concluded. Paul is not speaking of a process, or of something the Christian should do, but of an accomplished fact, true of all Christians.

In what sense then has the Christian **died**? He has died in Christ to the reign and mastery of sin over his life and thoughts. A radical break with sin has taken place for the Christian. This is the object of the reign of grace mentioned in Romans 5:21.

How, therefore, did we die to sin? Answer: By virtue of our union with Jesus Christ. To say that we are **baptized into Christ** is to say that we have been brought into union with Him. It signifies our intimate identification with Christ. Union with Christ means union with Him in all that He is and in all phases of His work as our Mediator and Redeemer. As Christians, we are no longer “in Adam.” Now by grace through faith we are “in Christ.” We are so closely united with Him that whatever happened to Him happens to us; whatever He deserves, we receive, I Corinthians 1:30.

³⁵ John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, 485, 492f.

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Our victory over sin is based on the reality of our union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. The phrases in our text—**into HIS death** and **buried WITH Him**—should be carefully considered. Their point is this: Romans 6 is concerned with the experiential effects in our individual lives of our union with Christ WHEN He died, WHEN He was buried, and WHEN He was raised from the dead. It refers to a “baptism” into those historical events of the gospel, of which water baptism is a sign and seal, presupposing those events.

We died in Christ when Christ died, Galatians 2:20. We were buried in Christ when Christ was buried. This emphasizes the completion and finality of death. This spiritual burial proclaims that a person is finished with life as a slave to sin. And we were raised from the dead in Christ when Christ was raised from the dead. Christ’s resurrection is the ultimate proof that He conquered and overturned the reign of sin and death. We are not left in the grave, because Christ was not left in the grave. God raised Him, and God raised us in Him—**But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who are asleep... For as all in Adam die, so also all in Christ shall be made alive**, I Corinthians 15:20,22. Therefore, we were crucified with Christ and the mastery of sin over us has been broken. We are no longer slaves to sin, and we walk in newness of life, presenting ourselves day by day to God as His grateful servants, living in the power of Christ’s resurrection.

THE MEANING OF BAPTISM AS A SIGN AND SEAL

What does it mean to say that water baptism is a sign and seal of our union with Christ? By means of these “signs” and “seals,” God renders His faithfulness and His promise more certain to believers, reassuring them of their part in the salvation in Christ God promised His people in the covenant, thereby strengthening their faith, increasing their assurance of salvation and advancing their sanctification.

We read in the Westminster Confession of Faith:

1. Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life. — 6. The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, not withstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace

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belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in His appointed time.
[My emphasis] – Westminster Confession of Faith, 28.1,6.

We learn in the first paragraph, 28:1, that the purpose of baptism is twofold: (1) For the solemn and public admission of a person into the institutional church; and (2) To be a sign and seal of that person's participation in the salvific blessings of God's covenant through faith in Jesus Christ. The second paragraph, 28:6, also teaches us two truths about the "efficacy" of baptism: (1) It is not inseparably tied to the moment in which water baptism is administered; and (2) By the right use of baptism *the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred, by the Holy Ghost* to those to whom saving grace has been promised and therefore to whom it properly belongs, i.e., the elect, Ephesians 1:3-4. The point here is that baptism is an effective means of grace to those to whom that grace is promised and to whom it belongs. To them that saving grace is *not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred* by the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit.

By *exhibit* the Westminster fathers meant not simply to show forth, but also to give – to communicate – to apply. They understood the sacraments not only as signifying and sealing the benefits of redemption and the promises of the covenant of God, but also as applying and conveying those benefits and promises to believers. Christ, by His Spirit, continues to give the benefits of redemption to those who observe the sacraments in a proper manner, I Corinthians 10:20f; 11:23-34, according to His own pleasure, in His appointed time.

In baptism as a *sign*, "God condescends to our weakness...He advertises that great truth [of our union with Christ] by an ordinance which portrays visibly to our senses the reality of this grace. It is a testimony which God has been pleased to give to us so that we may the better understand the high privilege of union with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."³⁶

[As a *seal*, baptism] authenticates, confirms, guarantees the reality and security of this covenant grace. It is not indeed indispensable to the grace sealed; the grace exists prior to the seal and the seal does not produce the grace sealed. But just as God confirmed His promise to Noah by the bow in the cloud and confirmed His promise to Abraham by the interposition of an oath, so He confirms to us the reality and security of the highest of spiritual relationships by adding the seal of

³⁶ John Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 87.

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baptism.... It is additional certification with which He provides *us* so that we may thereby be confirmed in the faith of His grace.³⁷

It is apparent that as a sign or seal, [water baptism] should not be identified with that which is signified and sealed. That which signifies is not the thing signified and that which seals is not the thing sealed. The sign or seal presupposes the existence of that which is signified or sealed. Hence baptism is the sign and seal of a spiritual reality which is conceived of as existing. Where that reality is absent the sign or seal has no efficacy. [My emphasis]³⁸

Equally pertinent is the observation that the sign or seal does not bring into existence that which is signified or sealed. It does not effect union with Christ.³⁹

G.I. Williamson shares the view of John Murray on this subject. Williamson writes:

Baptism *never* causes union with Christ. It never has that effect. This is not the purpose of baptism. The purpose of baptism is not to effect union with Christ but rather to confirm and testify such.... baptism testifies that God gives union with Christ to whom He will, as He will, and when He will. The effect of baptism is not that it causes union with Christ, but that it testifies of this union.⁴⁰

Romans 4:11 defines the relation of faith and baptism, (which is the fulfillment of circumcision according Colossians 2:11-12)—**And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised; that he might be the father of all them that believe.** Just as baptism does not contribute to the justification of the believer, neither does baptism create justifying faith, although it does sustain a definite relationship to faith and to justification. Baptism signifies and seals faith in the believer, which indicates that faith existed in the believer prior to the baptism, since, in Murray's words:

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964), 215.

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...a seal or authentication presupposes the existence of the thing sealed and the seal does not add to the content of the thing sealed.... A sign points to the existence of that which it signifies; and a seal authenticates, confirms and guarantees the genuineness of that which is signified.... And the seal is that which God Himself appended to assure Abraham that the faith he exercised in God's promise [prior to receiving the sign of the covenant] was accepted by God to the end of fulfilling to Abraham the promise which he believed. In Genesis 17:10-14, circumcision is clearly stated to be the sign of the covenant. There is no incompatibility. As the sign and seal of the covenant is also the seal of that faith and of the justification by faith apart from which the covenant is meaningless.⁴¹

That which is signified and sealed to the believer in baptism is **the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised**. From this statement we learn that: (1) Abraham received the sign of the covenant; (2) Circumcision was a seal of the faith he had before he was circumcised; and (3) Circumcision sealed to Abraham **the righteousness** which his faith had received, i.e., through the sign of circumcision, God assured Abraham of the reality of his justification. Therefore, since baptism fulfilled circumcision as the sign of the covenant (Col. 2:11-12), we can say that baptism seals the righteousness of faith presumably possessed by the one baptized while unbaptized—**faith which he had while uncircumcised**.

The righteousness of God in Christ which is given to all who believe includes imputed righteousness (i.e., justification – Romans 3-5) and imparted righteousness (i.e., regeneration and sanctification – Romans 6-8). Thus regeneration, justification and sanctification are sealed to us in baptism, the water of which is a symbol of God's purification of us from the guilt of sin by the blood of Christ (Acts 2:38; 22:16; I Peter 3:21), and from the pollution of sin by the cleansing renewal of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5; Titus 3:5; I Corinthians 6:11) who brings us into union and fellowship with God in Christ. To seal these blessings to the believer is to reassure him of their reality in his life. Regeneration is a sovereign work of God, John 3:8. Justification and sanctification are by faith in Christ, Romans 3:22; Acts 26:18;22; I Corinthians 1:30. Baptism was meant not only to strengthen that faith, but also to advance the sanctifying work of God in the heart and life of the believer.

⁴¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans, NICNT, Vol. I* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), 137-138.

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That is the point of Titus 3:5—**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 Spirit.**⁴² Paul adds this thought in Ephesians 5:26—**...that He might sanctify and cleanse her [the church] with the washing of water by the Word.**

God in Christ “washes” His church from the defilement of sin by the regenerating, renewing, sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit with the Word of God. In these two verses, Titus 3:5 and Ephesians 5:26, Paul is using “sacramental language,” which, as we will see, is proper because of the nature of the “sacramental union” of visual sign and the Spiritual blessings signified by it. In other words, it is proper to call the Spiritual reality signified by the sign and conveyed to believers in the sign by the name of the visual sign itself, without identifying the two. Hence, the Holy Spirit “washes” the church which is “cleansed” by **the washing of water by the Word.** This sanctifying work of the Spirit and Word is signified, sealed and continued in us in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. As Calvin observed:

Paul did not mean to signify that our cleansing and salvation are accomplished by water, or that water contains in itself the power to cleanse, regenerate and renew; nor that here is the cause of salvation, but only that in this sacrament are received knowledge and certainty of such gifts. This the words themselves explain clearly enough. For Paul joins together the Word of life and the baptism of water, as if he had said: “Through the gospel a message of our cleansing and sanctification is brought to us; through such baptism the message is sealed.”⁴³

THE MEANING OF “BAPTISM NOW SAVES YOU”

This brings us to I Peter 3:20-21—**...when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...**

⁴² Some adherents of this new view of the objectivity of the covenant use Titus 3:5 to support “baptismal regeneration,” because it speaks of **the washing of regeneration.** However, in order for their interpretation to “hold water,” it would have to say “the regeneration of washing,” presuming that “washing” refers to baptism.

⁴³ John Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, xv, 2.

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According to Peter, ...**and corresponding to that, baptism now saves you...** Corresponding to what? Corresponding to the water of the Noahic flood, which water **brought** Noah and his family **safely through the water**, i.e., which water **saved** Noah and his family from cultural pollution and divine judgment, and was a type or symbol of Christian baptism which **saves** us from divine judgment and sinful pollutions as a sign and seal of the benefits of redemption. The point is that Noah was baptized unto salvation and corresponding to that Christians are baptized unto salvation. The flood was for Noah a baptism. The violent human race was immersed to death in the flood as God's judgment on them; but Noah and his family were baptized by the flood. God separated them from the world and saved them for Himself from the depravity and condemnation of the world.

Peter saw a "typical" resemblance between the flood and baptism. As the flood waters cleansed the earth of man's wickedness, thereby saving Noah and his family, so the water of baptism or, better put, God by the water of baptism seals to believers cleansing from sin, thereby "saving" the baptized believer. As the flood separated Noah and his family from the wicked world of their day, so baptism separates believers from the evil world of our day. Baptism is the counterpart of the flood.

The parallel lies in the saving experience of Noah and his family, passing through the flood waters to a new world. Christian baptism signifies and seals to the believer his passage from the old life to a new life in Christ. To put it in Peter's words: **baptism now saves you**. Each word is important. (1) **Baptism** is a sign and seal of salvation. (2) **Now** is a word often used by Peter in his first epistle, 1:6; 1:12; 2:10; 2:25. It denotes the time of the new covenant, "the last days," the day of salvation, the reign of Christ, the dawn of the age to come in history in Christ. (3) **Saves** is in the present tense denoting "continuing saving." The sign and seal of the covenant continues the effects of salvation in us which are ours by grace through faith, Ephesians 2:8-9; Acts 16:31. Salvation as defined by Peter is total and eternal freedom from sin and perfection in holiness, 1:1-25. (4) The pronoun, **us**, refers to those who possess salvation by faith, **who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure**, I Peter 1:1-2.

Peter then tells us in what sense baptism does NOT save and in what sense it DOES save—**not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ**, 3:21.

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Water baptism does not save in a physical, material and literal sense. The waters of baptism cannot wash away sin. Water can wash away dirt from the body, but it cannot cleanse sin from the heart. The sacrament in and of itself is ineffective in obtaining salvation.

[Beware] the folly and danger of trusting in the mere external rite of baptism, or in anything that is external. Happily we are not taught the soul-deluding doctrine of... baptismal regeneration... On the contrary, we are taught that the sacraments become effectual to salvation, not from any virtue in themselves, or in those who administer them, but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of His Spirit in those who by faith receive them; and that no baptism saves, except that which is connected with engrafting into Christ, and partaking of the covenant of grace, and is an engagement to be the Lord's. [Various quotes from the Westminster Shorter Catechism – My Emphasis]

John Brown writes:

Let us beware, then, of supposing that we are safe because we have been baptized, whether in infancy or on our personal profession of faith.... He is not a true Christian who is one outwardly; neither is that saving baptism which consists merely in the application of water to the body.⁴⁴

How then does baptism save? Peter gives a twofold answer.

(1) Its saving efficacy is inseparable from **a good conscience**, i.e., a conscience **cleansed...from dead works to serve the living God**, Hebrews 9:14, by **the blood of Christ**, 9:14, **through faith**, Romans 3:25. For these believers baptism is **an appeal**, i.e., a “pledge.” It is the believer’s pledge to serve the Lord with a good conscience and with a life lived conscientiously and obediently to God’s honor and glory. (And it is God’s pledge reassuring the believer of God’s covenanted blessings of salvation to him.) We turn again to John Brown:

A man has a good conscience; he has obtained this good conscience by the resurrection of Christ; he makes a declaration of this good conscience in his baptism, and it is in this way that the Apostle declares that baptism saves. ...a good conscience is just a right and happy state of thought and feeling in reference to our relations and duties to God, confidence in God, love to God...

⁴⁴ John Brown, *The First Epistle of Peter*, Vol. II, 254-255.

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Of this good conscience, of a mind at peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, a heart with the love of God shed abroad in it, the converted Jew or Pagan made a profession, when, in obedience to the command of Christ, he submitted to baptism. Thus confessing, by an external act, what he believed in his heart, that God had raised Christ from the dead, he was saved. In this way...can it be said that **baptism saves us.**⁴⁵

(2) Its efficacy is **through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God**, vv. 21-22. Without Christ's resurrection, intercession and reign at God's right hand, which presupposes His prior death and burial, baptism would be an empty ritual. Christ's resurrection is the basis of the righteousness sealed to us and the guarantee of the victory accomplished by His death. The resurrected Christ by the power of His Spirit applies to the lives of believers through the sacraments the blessings of the salvation He accomplished by His death and resurrection, and which they have received by grace through faith in Him.

In the New Testament we learn that:

God saves us (I Timothy 4:10).

God's grace saves us (Ephesians 1:7).

Christ saves us (II Timothy 1:10).

The blood of Christ saves us (Romans 3:24-25).

The resurrection of Christ saves us (Romans 5:10).

The Holy Spirit saves us (Titus 3:5).

Faith in Christ saves us (Luke 7:50; 18:12).

Our confession of faith in connection with faith saves us (Romans 10:9-10).

Baptism in connection with faith saves us (I Peter 3:21).

Each of these statements is true. They are all perfectly consistent with each other. Faithful study of the Bible will show in what sense each of these statements is true and how each is related to the other. As John Brown writes, "...he only understands how sinful men are saved, who sees the meaning and apprehends the consistency, of these statements."⁴⁶ Brown continues:

God, in the exercise of sovereign grace, saves men through the mediation of His Son, who died as an atoning victim, and rose again to

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 252-253.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 251.

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the possession of all power in heaven and earth, that He might save all coming to the Father by Him, who, being led by the operation of the Holy Spirit to believe the gospel of salvation, become personally interested in the blessings procured through the mediation of the Son; and, wherever men are made really to believe the gospel, they, as the natural result of faith, and in obedience to the divine command, make a profession of that faith; and in the case of those who in mature life are brought from a false religion to the knowledge and belief of the gospel, the commencement of this profession is baptism...⁴⁷

The Bible makes clear that water-baptism does not save everyone who receives it; nor does God promise to save everyone who receives water-baptism. As circumcision in the Old Testament, baptism, as a sign of the covenant, places the one baptized into a realm of God's special blessings and special curses, Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26. If that person lives faithfully and in accordance with what his baptism signifies, because he has truly received from God the spiritual realities it signifies by grace through faith, Ephesians 2:8-9; John 3:16, God shall bestow upon him rich covenant blessings. But, if a baptized person lives antithetically to what baptism signifies, he is in store for severe covenant curses, either leading him back to the right path, if he is a true believer who has wandered off track, or sealing his eternal condemnation because he never possessed the spiritual realities signified in the sacrament, since he persisted in his unbelief.

God does not promise salvation to all, without exception, who are baptized with water in His name. Since not all who are baptized with water go to heaven, then, if God promised to all baptized persons salvation, His promise failed. The promise of the gospel that God will be our God and we will be His children in Christ is the essence of the covenant. His promise does not fail, Joshua 21:45. He does not lie, Hebrews 6:18. All His promises are "Yea and Amen" in Christ, II Corinthians 1:20-22. In other words, according to Herman Hoeksema:

[W]hen God promises something, then it is absolutely certain that He will bestow that which He promised. There is no difference in certainty between the promise and the fulfillment, between the objective bequest and the subjective application. All that God promises [in the gospel]

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

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He also most certainly performs, and to whomsoever He promises anything He will also certainly give it.⁴⁸

As the Westminster Confession of Faith teaches us: *the grace promised in the Word and Sacraments is offered to all who would believe, but it is really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth, i.e., His (soterically) elect people in Christ, Ephesians 1:3f. Therefore, to the believer in Jesus, Acts 13:48, the sacrament of baptism is a sign and seal...of his ingrafting into Christ, which he received by faith, of his regeneration by the Holy Spirit in which he was given the gift of faith, and his remission of sins through faith in Christ, and of his submission to God through Jesus Christ to walk in newness of life. Assurance of these blessings of salvation given in the sacraments is inseparable from the faith and submission to God in the one baptized.*⁴⁹

THE SACRAMENTAL MODE OF SPEAKING

I Peter 3:21 uses a sacramental mode of speaking when it states that **baptism now saves you**. The actions of the resurrected Christ signified and sealed in the sacraments are sometimes spoken of in terms of the visual signs that represent them (Ezekiel 36:22; Psalm 50:8; Matthew 26:27,28; Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:11,12; Genesis 17:10,13; Exodus 13:21; 34:5; Psalm 47:6). This is proper because *there is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other* (WCF 27.2)⁵⁰. The visible *sign* is the part of the sacrament we see and touch. The *thing signified* is Christ, the promises of the New Covenant, and the benefits of salvation. The *spiritual relation or sacramental union* between the two is that divinely ordained relation between the sign and the thing signified that depends entirely upon the institution and good pleasure of Christ. Because of this union a “sacramental language or mode of speaking” is possible, in which the names of the signs and the spiritual blessings they signify may be used interchangeably, not to destroy the difference between the sign and the spiritual grace, nor to indicate that the grace is inseparable from the sign, but to teach us that in the sacraments Christ really offers the spiritual blessing along

⁴⁸ Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1971), 20-21.

⁴⁹ In Ephesians 4:6, the apostle Paul speaks of **one Lord, one faith, one baptism**. William Hendriksen (quoting Scott), makes this comment on this triad: “It is better to take the whole sentence as expressive of a single fundamental fact: ‘one Lord in whom we all believe and in whose name we have been baptized.’”- *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1967), 187.

⁵⁰ “WCF” refers to the Westminster Confession of Faith, 1648.

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with the visible sign to all those who receive the sacraments with faith. A symbol is often thought of and spoken of as if it were identical with what it stands for, although we know the two are distinguished from each other.⁵¹ For example, Christ calls the literal **cup** of the Last Supper the **covenant—This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood**, Luke 22:20. The cup is the new covenant! Now, obviously, this is not a literal statement. It is a sacramental way of saying things, because of the nature of the sacramental union between the sign and the grace signified.⁵²

The Bible is full of this sacramental mode of speaking. Christ is said to be **our Passover** in I Corinthians 5:7. The bread and wine are said to be the **body and blood** of Christ, I Corinthians 11:24f. **Baptism** is said to save us, I Peter 3:21. Christ is the **rock** from which Israel drank water, I Corinthians 10:1f. Romans 6:4 says that **we have been buried with Christ through baptism into death**. Colossians 2:11 speaks of the regenerating work of the Spirit signified in baptism as **a circumcision made without hands**.

This mode of speaking is more common in the Bible than one might think. When Moses described the Glory Cloud leading the children of Israel on their journey, he did not say simply that “the cloud went before them,” but **the LORD went before them**, Exodus 13:21, because the Cloud was a visualization and pledge of the Lord’s presence with His people. When the Glory Cloud descended upon the Tabernacle, Exodus 34:5 says that the Lord descended, “the sacred name being applied to the visible symbol.”⁵³ Furthermore, when the Ark of the Covenant was taken up to the Temple at the blast of the trumpet, the psalmist says: **God is gone up with a shout**, Psalm 47:6f. In John 1:32, the dove, representing the Holy Spirit is said to be the Spirit Himself descending from heaven.

⁵¹ “...in the sacraments we have such a close connection between the symbol and the spiritual gift which it represents that we can ‘easily pass from the one to the other’ in our speech and refer to the bread as being indeed the body of Christ, and Baptism as being the ‘laver of regeneration,’ Titus 3:5, and as an act that washes our sins away, I Peter 3:21.”- Ronald Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd LTD., 1953), 161.

⁵² “...whenever the sacraments are treated of, it is usual to transfer the name of the thing signified by metonymy to the sign. [Metonymy is “a figure of speech in which an idea is evoked or named by means of a term designating some associated notion.”- *The American Heritage Dictionary*]. Examples occur too frequently in Scripture for any opponents, however keen, to venture to deny that this mode of speech must be regarded as the general rule. Hence as the manna of old was spiritual food, as the water was Christ, as the Holy Spirit was a dove, as baptism was the laver of regeneration, so the bread is called the body and the wine the blood of Christ.”- John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises, Vol. II* (1849; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958), 243.

⁵³ Wallace, 162.

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THE ESSENCE OF THE COVENANT OF GOD

The covenant of God is not a mere external thing. It is not an empty and short-lived promise to a corporate body. Entering the covenant is not to be identified with being baptized into the organized church. Neither the covenant nor one's entrance into it can be photographed.

God's covenant, at heart, is "a relationship of friendship between God and man, a communion of life, in which man is made to share in the divine life" according to Lewis Bevens Schenck.⁵⁴ Bevens continues:

This is Calvin's conception, for he said: "These words—**I will be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee**—contain the promise of eternal life.' ... 'Let us then mark this as the principal part of the Covenant,' Calvin declared, 'that he who is the God of the living, not of the dead, promises to be a God to the children of Abraham...In this single word we are plainly taught that this was a *spiritual covenant*, not confirmed in reference to the present life only; but one from which Abraham might conceive the hope of eternal salvation.' The promise, in which the virtue of the sign of circumcision consisted, included in his view the paternal favor of God, remission of sins, and eternal life. The covenant then represents not merely an external relationship, but also, and above all, a spiritual reality, a communion of life.⁵⁵

Herman Hoeksema further defines Covenant:

The essence of the covenant is not...to be sought in the idea that the covenant is a certain way, or manner, of salvation by which God would make us partakers of everlasting glory, as many others describe the covenant, thereby actually denying that God's covenant is eternal. Nor does it consist in a certain agreement between two parties according to which mutual stipulations and conditions must be met, as it is also often presented; for the covenant is God's, and he bestows upon His friends all that is necessary for the life and the battle of the covenant. But the essence of the covenant is to be sought in this living relation of friendship whereby God the Lord is sovereign-friend of His people, and they are the Lord's friend-servants, partaking of His fellowship, by

⁵⁴ Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*, (1940; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

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grace possessing and manifesting His life and fighting the battle of His cause in the midst of the world. The realization of that covenant as it shall be presently revealed in everlasting glory constitutes the history of salvation; the struggle in the cause of that covenant is the battle of the ages.⁵⁶

Why does Hoeksema have such a high view of God's covenant?⁵⁷ Hoeksema answers:

First of all, then, we would proceed from the idea that God is a Covenant God. He is that in Himself, even apart from any relation to His creature. From eternity to eternity the infinite God lives a divinely perfect covenant life in Himself. This follows from God's triune subsistence. God is one in Being. – But God is also three in Persons. – There are in the one divine Essence three I's, three subjects of that entire divine life. One divine Being, but three Who bear that Being. One divine life, but three Who live that life. One divine mind, but three Who think in that divine mind. One divine will, but three Who will in that divine will. One divine love, but three Who love with that divine love. Thus the Scriptures reveal God to us...

Thus, then, God is the eternally living One in Himself. There is the most perfect unity of Being in God, and nevertheless personal distinction: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, willing and thinking, living and loving in the one, eternally good and perfect divine Being, thinking and willing and loving always the same, and knowing one another perfectly, and yet so, that each of the three Persons lives that divine life according to His personal attributes. It is herein that the essence of the covenant is to be found. That life of God is a covenant life, a life of the most intimate communion of love and friendship, resting in the unity of God's Being and living through the personal distinction. The Lord God is a covenant God.

Now it has pleased God, according to His sovereign good pleasure, according to the counsel of His will, to reveal this covenant life outside of Himself and to make the creature a partaker of that divine covenant life, and that, too, in the highest possible sense of the word....

⁵⁶ Hoeksema, 65-66.

⁵⁷ My quoting of Herman Hoeksema does not mean that I share those views that are distinctive of him and the Protestant Reformed Church.

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When God, therefore, establishes His covenant with creatures whom He in His sovereign grace has chosen and prepared thereunto, then in that covenant He is the Friend-Sovereign while the creature is His friend-servant according to the ordinance of that covenant. The covenant is God's, and God's alone. He establishes it. He forms the creature who will share in that covenant. He imparts His life, and He writes His law in their hearts and sheds abroad His love in those hearts. He eternally blesses them in that covenant with the full, rich life of His fellowship....

That creature serves Him in love and consecrates Himself as friend-servant of the Lord God with his whole existence and with all things. Thus that friend of God also becomes prophet, priest, and king under God. He is prophet in order to love God with all his mind, to know Him and to glorify His great name. He is priest in order to love the Lord with all his heart and from the sanctuary of his heart to offer up himself and all things in consecration to Him. He is king, in order that with all his strength he may cleave to the Lord his God, ask after His ordinances, and rule over all creatures in His name.⁵⁸

THE RELATION OF BAPTISM AND THE COVENANT

Is everyone who is baptized with water brought into the covenant bond of intimate friendship with the triune God? Of course not!⁵⁹ Does God promise to bring every baptized person into this covenant bond of intimate friendship with Himself? Of course not! *Baptism is...to be unto him [who is baptized] a sign and seal of the covenant of grace*⁶⁰. And baptism is an effective means of grace in that *by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in His appointed time*⁶¹ (WCF 28.1,6).

So then, if baptism is to be a means of grace assuring a person of his participation in the covenant life and bond with the triune God: (1) It must be used rightly, i.e., received with faith in Jesus Christ. (2) The person baptized must be one to whom the saving grace of God's covenant belongs, i.e., he must

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 60-64.

⁵⁹ The case of Jacob and Esau proves this point. Both were given the sacramental sign of the covenant of circumcision as God had commanded. Esau never received that saving grace signified in the sign and seal he bore in his own body. God loved Jacob and hated Esau.

⁶⁰ Romans 4:11; Colossians 2:11-12.

⁶¹ Galatians 3:27; Titus 3:5; Ephesians 5:25; Acts 2:38-41.

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be one of God's elect in Christ. The Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 31 states: *The covenant of grace is made with Christ as the second Adam, and in Him with all the elect as His seed.* And Q. 32 says that in God's covenant He not only provides and offers to sinners salvation in Christ, requiring faith in them, but that He also *promiseth and giveth His Holy Spirit to all His elect, to work in them that faith...* (3) The time and specific nature of the efficacy of baptism in God's elect is sovereignly determined by the good pleasure of God.

A question arises: since only the elect in Christ enjoy covenant life and communion with God, what is the relation of a baptized but unregenerated, and perhaps non-elect, person to the covenant of God?⁶² Is he in any sense in covenant with God? These questions require careful answers. The new view of the covenant would answer that there is no such person, because he received regeneration at baptism, and was by that baptism incorporated into Christ, who is the elect of God, and therefore he is elect in Him. Hence, everyone in the visible church has received regeneration and is elect in Christ.⁶³ But, what does the Bible say?

First, it is possible for an unregenerate, and even non-elect, person to be baptized and thereby be publicly initiated into the visible church, either upon a credible profession of faith in Christ and the Bible, or as a child of the covenant, being born of a baptized parent. Not all whose profession of faith is considered credible by the elders of the church are, in fact, regenerate. Only God can see the heart. At the same time, among the children of believers there are Esau's and Ishmaels, who were not in communion with God because they were devoid of faith, but who did bear the sign of the covenant.

Second, the visible church is the covenant community of God. It is that body of people who bear the sign of the covenant, who have confessed faith in the covenant God, and who have publicly professed that they will be wholly and only the Lord's, along with their children. Not all who make these public and objective commitments are in communion with God, Matthew 7:22-23.

⁶² That the visible church contains both elect and non-elect persons is taught in such places as II Timothy 2:20.

⁶³ "...reading the Bible this way, and in this sense, we *can* speak of baptismal regeneration... By our baptism we have been reborn in this sense—having died with Christ, we've been raised with Him.... because by baptism—by baptism—the Spirit joins us to Christ. Since He is the elect one, we are joined to His body, we therefore are elect. Since He is the justified one, we are justified in Him." (My emphasis) – Steve Wilkins, "The Legacy of the Half-Way Covenant," a lecture delivered at the Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference, Winter, 2002.

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We see this in Romans 9:6-8, where Paul rehearses the privileges bestowed by God upon the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, as he grieves over the unbelief of the Jews of his generation. Some might ask: if God has promised such rich blessings on the nation of Israel, why is it that not all Jews have received them? Has the promise of God failed? Paul's answer is: **But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's seed, but: "Through Isaac your seed will be named." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of promise are regarded as seed.** - Roman 9:6-8. The point is that not all natural descendants of the patriarchs are "of Israel," i.e., not all the physical seed are spiritual seed. Not all who are *in* the covenant are *of* the covenant.⁶⁴ Not all who are *in* the church are *of* the church. "...there is an 'Israel' within ethnic Israel."⁶⁵ Paul has already made this distinction in Romans 2:28-29—**For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.**⁶⁶

The Israel distinguished [in Romans 9:6-8] from the Israel of natural descent is the *true Israel*. They are indeed **of Israel** but not coextensive with the latter. It is in accord with our Lord's usage to make this kind of distinction within a designated class. He distinguished between those who were disciples and those **truly** disciples, John 8:30-32. He spoke of Nathaniel as **truly** an Israelite, John 1:47. If we use Paul's own language, this Israel is Israel **according to the Spirit**, Galatians 4:29, and **the Israel of God**, Galatians 6:16, although in the latter passage he is no doubt including the people of God of all nations. The purpose of this distinction is to show that the covenantal promise of God did not have respect to Israel after the flesh but to this *true* Israel and that, therefore,

⁶⁴ This is the distinction Herman Bavinck makes according to Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 289.

⁶⁵ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, Vol. II (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), 9.

⁶⁶ The contrast in Romans 2:28-29 is between what is "outward" and what is "inward." The "outward" here is the natural descent of the Jews from Abraham and the privileges of that relationship. The "inward" is the work of the Spirit applying the spiritual graces signified in the visible sacramental signs. "The contrast [in II Corinthians 3:6,7,8] is that between the Holy Spirit and the law as externally administered, a contrast between the life-giving power which the Holy Spirit imparts and the impotence which belongs to law as mere law. We shall have to adopt this contrast here [in Romans 2:28,29]. Hence what the apostle says is that the circumcision which is of the heart is by the Holy Spirit and not by the law. He is again exposing the folly of Jewish presumption and of confidence in the mere possession of the law as embodied in the Scripture. The word 'spirit' ought therefore to have been written with a capital to make plain that the reference is to the Holy Spirit."- Murray, Vol. I, 89.

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the unbelief and rejection of ethnic Israel as a whole in no way interfered with the fulfillment of God's covenant purpose and promise. The word of God, therefore, has not been violated. Murray confirms the point:

The argument of the apostle here is not *in principle* different from that which we find earlier in this epistle. There is a parallel between his present contention and his polemic that **not through the law was the promise to Abraham or to his seed**, 4:13, and that the children of Abraham were those **who walk in the steps** of Abraham's faith, 4:12...⁶⁷

In Romans 9:7, Paul continues this distinction, but now in terms of that distinction between **Abraham's seed**, i.e., Abraham's natural posterity, and **children**, i.e., the *true* Israel, who are the heirs of covenant promise. These *true* children of Abraham mentioned in verse 7 are described in verse 8 as **children of God**. The choice and calling of Isaac over Esau prove this point, Genesis 21:12.⁶⁸ In verse 8 there is a contrast between **the children of the flesh** and **children of God** or **the children of the promise**, who are the *true* seed. Murray writes:

[**The children of the promise** are those among the natural descendants of the patriarchs who] derive their origin from the promise of God.... In the sequence of thought [in verses 6, 7, and 8], therefore, this word, **promise**, specifies that which is explanatory of the sustained distinction between the more inclusive and the restricted use of the various terms **Israel**, **seed** and **children**. In each case the restricted use is defined by what is implicit in God's promise. This brings us back to verse 6: **But it is not as though the word of God hath come to naught**. The **word of God** is God's covenant promise. It has not come to naught because it contemplates those whose identity is derived from the same covenant promise. The seed to whom the promise was

⁶⁷ Murray, Vol. II, 9-10.

⁶⁸ In the phrase, **through Isaac your seed will be named**, which is a quote of Genesis 21:12, **seed** probably should not be taken in a collective sense, but in a singular and personal sense. It could be understood as "Isaac shall be called your seed" in contrast with "Abraham's seed." The point is that Isaac is the *true* seed. If it is to be taken in the collective sense, "the meaning...would have to be that in reckoning the true seed from Isaac the same principle of differentiation would have to apply to Isaac's seed as was operative in the case of Isaac himself. That is to say, the collective 'seed' are not those descended from Isaac but those 'of Isaac' who like him are children of promise." – Murray, Vol. II, 11.

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given or, at least, the seed whom the promise had in view are those in whom the promise takes effect; they are **children of promise**.⁶⁹

Third, the covenant relationship that God has established with His people in Christ has two aspects to it: (1) A communion of life with God based on the redemptive work of Christ; and (2) A sovereignly-dictated order of life by the covenant Lord, consecrating those who bear the sign of the covenant to Himself.⁷⁰ God has given His covenant people promises to nourish and encourage their faith; and laws with sanctions to direct their lives. All who bear the sign of the covenant are thereby consecrated to God's purposes, and are commanded by Him to believe the covenant promises and to obey the covenant laws. To His *true* seed, the elect in Christ, the Holy Spirit gives the gift of faith in the promises along with the desire and ability to obey God's law.

This distinction between "a communion of life" and "a sovereignly dictated order of life" in God's covenant is a Biblical distinction. That the covenant includes at heart "a communion of life with God in Christ," is evident in such texts as Psalm 25:14; 89:33,34; 103:17,18; Jeremiah 31:33,34; Hebrews 8:10-12; Ezekiel 36:25-28; II Corinthians 6:16; Revelation 21:2,3. That it includes "a sovereignly dictated order of life" is indicated in such texts as Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26. These two "aspects" or "sides" of God's covenant are not in a dualistic relation to each other, as if they were over against each other. Both are brought together in Genesis 17, where we are told that the "outward" sign of the covenant, i.e., circumcision, is a sign and seal of union and communion with God, Genesis 17:7, and is used as a means of grace in the *true* seed, v. 10.

Of these two distinctions, Louis Berkhof writes:

The two cannot be conceived of as existing alongside of each other, without some inner connection, but must be regarded as being most intimately related to each other, in order to avoid all dualism. When one takes the covenant relation upon himself voluntarily, the two must naturally go together; if they do not, a false relation ensues. But in the case of those who are *born* in the covenant the question is more difficult. Is the one then possible without the other? Is the covenant in that case a bare legal relationship, in which that which ought to be—but

⁶⁹ Murray, Vol. II, 12.

⁷⁰ This phrase "a sovereignly dictated order of life" is Meredith Kline's term. In his book *Treaty of the Great King*, he writes: "Such a covenant is a declaration of God's lordship, consecrating a people to himself in a sovereignly dictated order of life." (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), 17.

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is not—takes the place of the glorious realities for which the covenant stands? Is there any reasonable ground to expect that the covenant relation will issue in a living communion; that for the sinner, who is of himself unable to believe, the covenant will actually become a living reality? In answer to this question it may be said that God undoubtedly desires that the covenant relationship shall issue in a covenant life. And He Himself guarantees by His promises pertaining to the seed of believers that this will take place, not in the case of every individual, but in the seed of the covenant collectively. On the basis of the promise of God we may believe that, under a faithful administration of the covenant, the covenant relation will, as a rule, be fully realized in a covenant life.

In discussing membership in the covenant as a legal relationship, it should be borne in mind that the covenant in this sense is not merely a system of demands and promises, demands that ought to be met, and promises that ought to be realized; but that it also includes a reasonable expectation that the external legal relationship will carry with it the glorious reality of a life in intimate communion with the covenant God. This is the only way in which the idea of the covenant is fully realized.

Adults can only enter this covenant voluntarily by faith and confession. From this it follows that in their case, unless their confession be false, entrance into the covenant as a legal relationship and into the covenant as a communion of life coincide.... With respect to the children of believers, who enter the covenant by birth, the situation is, of course, somewhat different.... Yet even in their case there must be a reasonable assurance that the covenant is not or will not remain a mere legal relationship, with external duties and privileges, pointing to that which ought to be, but is also or will in time become a living reality. This assurance is based on the promise of God, which is absolutely reliable, that he will work in the hearts of the covenant youth with His saving grace and transform them into living members of the covenant. The covenant is more than the mere offer of salvation, more even than the offer of salvation plus the promise to believe the gospel. It also carries with it the assurance, based on the promises of God, who works in the children of the covenant “when, where, and how He pleaseth,” that saving faith will be wrought in their hearts. As long as the children of the covenant do not reveal the contrary, we shall have to proceed on the assumption that they are in possession of the covenant life.

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Berkhof continues:

Naturally, the course of events may prove that this life is not yet present; it may even prove that it is never realized in their lives. The promises of God are given to the seed of believers collectively, and not individually. God's promise to continue His covenant and to bring it to full realization in the children of believers, does not mean that He will endow every last one of them with saving faith.... The mere fact that one is in the covenant [i.e., the covenant community] does not carry with it the assurance of salvation.... If we stress the covenant responsibilities only or excessively, and fail to give due prominence to the fact that in the covenant God gives whatsoever He demands of us, in other words, that His promises cover all His requirements, we are in danger of falling into the snare of Arminianism.

From the preceding it follows that even unregenerate and unconverted persons may be in the covenant [i.e., the covenant community].... Hence the question arises, in what sense such persons may be regarded as being in the covenant. (1) They are in the covenant as far as their responsibility is concerned. Because they stand in the legal covenant relationship to God, they are in duty bound to repent and believe.... The special relationship in which they are placed to God, therefore, means added responsibility. (2) They are in covenant in the sense that they may⁷¹ lay claim to the promises which God gave when He established His covenant with believers and their seed.... As a rule God gathers the number of His elect out of those who stand in this covenant relationship. (3) They are in covenant in the sense that they are subject to the ministrations of the covenant. They are constantly admonished and exhorted to live according to the requirements of the covenant. The church treats them as covenant children, offers them the seals of the covenant, and exhorts them to a proper use of these. (4) They are in the covenant also as far as the common covenant blessings are concerned. Though they do not experience the regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit, yet they are subject to certain special operations and influences of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit strives with them in a special manner, convicts them of sin, enlightens them in a measure, and

⁷¹ Or better, "should lay claim..."

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enriches them with the blessings of common grace, Genesis 6:3; Matthew 13:18-22; Hebrews 6:4-6.⁷²

The Westminster Larger Catechism deals with this subject in terms of the special privileges members of the visible church receive, regenerate or unregenerate:

The visible church hath the privilege of being under God's special care and government; of being protected and preserved in all ages, notwithstanding the opposition of all enemies; and of enjoying the communion of saints, the ordinary means of salvation, and offers of grace by Christ to all the members of it in the ministry of the gospel, testifying, that whosoever believes in Him shall be saved, and excluding none that will come unto Him.- (Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 63)

CONCLUSION

So then, not all who are baptized are in Christ and in possession of the benefits of salvation. Not all who have received the sign of the covenant, i.e., baptism, are in possession of covenant life and communion with God. The salvific promise of the covenant is made to believers and their seed organically in that the *true* and elect seed of God is to be found ordinarily among the natural descendants of those who are baptized into the organized church. Only the *true* seed are in union and communion with Christ. God does not promise to bestow salvation on each and every person who is baptized. While all who bear the sign of the covenant are commanded by God to believe His promises and obey His laws, only elect individuals in Christ are enabled by the Holy Spirit to believe and obey:

The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that He freely provideth and offereth to sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by Him; and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in Him, promiseth and giveth His Holy Spirit to all His elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and to enable them unto all holy obedience.... (Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 32)

Since the promise of the covenant is made to Christ's Church organically and corporately, we are to consider all those who have been baptized and have made a credible profession of faith in Christ and the Bible to be the regenerate sons

⁷² Berkhof, 286-289.

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and daughters of God, along with their children, unless by their lives they prove themselves to be apostate and are excommunicated. But, even then, the prodigal son came home!

Lewis Schenck makes this clear:

Granting, however, that the church does have many in its number who are not Christians, yet it is likewise true that she should not receive anyone into the church except those who presumably are Christians. Our judgment then must be a judgment of charity.⁷³ We must take the position that those who [credibly] profess their faith in Christ as their personal Savior are presumably Christians. Likewise, we must accept the children of believing parents as presumably God's children, on the basis of the covenant promise of God....

That it is the belief of Calvin that children entering the church on the ground of the covenant promise are presumptively regenerated, is evident from his own words, "We ought, therefore, to consider, that just as in the case of Abraham, the father of the faithful, the righteousness of faith preceded circumcision, so today in the children of the faithful, the gift of adoption is prior to baptism...."

Baptism has no significance for Calvin if it does not mean admission to the visible church on the ground of the covenant promise, which includes the presumptive regeneration of the children in the covenant. Calvin looks upon the child in the covenant as God's child, forgiven of sin and regenerated, with the new life as a latent seed, already at work in its heart. The child then opens its eyes redeemed on a world in which

⁷³ Norman Shepherd disagrees with this historic and Presbyterian doctrine of the presumed salvation of children of the covenant. According to Palmer Robertson's summary of Shepherd, "because of the covenantal reality of the transition from death to life involved in baptism, it is not simply a condescending 'judgment of charity' which regards all baptized persons as brothers. For baptism is the point of transition from death to life."- Robertson, 6. Steve Wilkins shares Shepherd's view as his words show: "Now, you see, given this perspective [of baptismal regeneration], there is no presumption necessary when it comes to baptized people. Traditionally, the reformed have said, we have to view our children as presumptively elect or presumptively regenerate, and, therefore, Christian. If we are willing to take the Scriptures at face value there is no presumption necessary.... And this is true, of course, because by baptism, *by baptism*, the Spirit joins us to Christ since he is the elect one and the Church is the elect people, we are joined to his body. *We therefore are elect.*" (My emphasis) - "The Legacy of the Halfway Covenant." The present paper was written to show the unBiblical nature of this viewpoint. For a careful expose of Wilkins' view of baptismal regeneration, see Mark Anthony, "Is Baptismal Regeneration Being Taught in the Reformed Community?", *The Counsel of Chalcedon*, July/August 2002, 29f.

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by careful nurture it is expected to grow and develop in the Christian ideal of life and character. The important point is that *this child is presumptively a Christian*. That Calvin so meant we see clearly from this passage:

The offspring of believers are born holy, because their children, while yet in the womb, before they breathe the vital air, have been adopted into the covenant of eternal life. Nor are they brought into the church by baptism on any other ground than because they belonged to the body of the Church before they were born. He who admits aliens to baptism profanes it...For how can it be lawful to confer the badges of Christ on aliens from Christ. Baptism must, therefore, be preceded by the gift of adoption, which is not the cause of half salvation merely, but gives salvation entire; and, this salvation is afterwards ratified by Baptism.⁷⁴

As *The Directory for the Public Worship of God* of the Westminster Assembly says, the children of believers are to be baptized, because, among other reasons, *they are Christians and federally [covenantally] holy before baptism*.

Why are we as baptized believers in Jesus to presume⁷⁵ our children to be in fellowship with the triune God? The answer is found in Deuteronomy 29:29—**The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.** In other words, when it comes to our covenant children, we are to view them in the light of the revelation of God to us in His Word, i.e., in terms of the promise of the covenant—**And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your seed after you,** Genesis 17:7. David viewed his dead infant as being in heaven, with whom he himself someday would be reunited, II Samuel 12:23. David believed his next infant to be beloved of God from his birth, II Samuel 12:25. And David considered himself to be a believer as a nursing infant and as in communion with God while unborn—**Yet Thou art He who didst bring me forth from the womb; Thou didst make me trust when upon my mother's breasts. Upon Thee I was cast from birth; Thou hast been my God from my mother's womb,** Psalm 22:9-10.


⁷⁴ Shenck, 11-13.

⁷⁵ To presume is to “assume to be true in the absence of proof to the contrary.”- *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

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While we consider our covenant children to belong to Christ and in communion with Him in Christ, we must also guard against abuse of God's grace, according to John Murray:

The comfort and confidence of God's covenant mercy may never be severed from covenant keeping. It is an abuse that turns the grace of God into lasciviousness, to divorce faith from piety and obedience. Hence, the sign and seal of baptism can be no pledge or guarantee to us of that which baptism signifies except as we are mindful of God's covenant, embrace its promises, discharge its obligations and lay hold in faith upon the covenant faithfulness of God...the degree of faith and assurance that God's promise to [our children] will be fulfilled is proportionate to the extent to which the fear of God, the keeping of His covenant, and the doing of His commandments rule in the heart and life.⁷⁶

In other words, we must not separate our faith in God's promise concerning our children from our sustained faithfulness in their Christian nurture. 

⁷⁶ Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 90-91.

Appendix I:

An Expository Sketch of John 15

Both Douglas Wilson⁷⁷ and Norman Shepherd⁷⁸ use Jesus' parable of the vine and the branches in John 15 to form their new view of the objectivity of the covenant.

Wilson:

All this [John 15] means that a man can be genuinely attached to Christ and yet bear no fruit. He is as attached as the fruit-bearing branch is. They both partake of the root and fatness of the tree. Sap flows in both branches. The fruitless branch tastes the heavenly gift. He has been enlightened (Hebrews 6:4). And when the process of apostasy comes to completion, he tramples underfoot the blood of the covenant *by which he was sanctified* (Hebrews 10:29).⁷⁹

Shepherd:

What Jesus is obviously saying [in John 15] is that his hearers are branches abiding in him as the vine. He exhorts them all to continue abiding in him by way of faith and obedience, that is, by bearing fruit. If they do, the Father will see to it that they bear even more fruit. They are at no point cast upon their own resources, because as branches they have their vitality at every point from the vine. If, on the other hand, the branches do not abide in Christ, but deny him and become disobedient, the Father will cut these branches off and destroy them.⁸⁰

After explaining what he thinks Jesus means by his parable of the vine and the branches, Shepherd tells us what it cannot mean: there cannot be two kinds of branches, some of which are really in Christ in a saving way and some of which are not really in Christ in a saving way. He claims that it cannot be said that they are in Christ only “outwardly,” and that any fruit they display is not genuine, therefore these “false” branches are cut off and destroyed, and only

⁷⁷ See Douglas Wilson, “Stumbling into Apostasy,” *Credenda Agenda*, Vol. 13, Number 2, 16; and *Reformed is Not Enough*, 132f.

⁷⁸ See Shepherd, “The Covenant Context for Evangelism,” 64f.

⁷⁹ Wilson, “Stumbling into Apostasy,” 16.

⁸⁰ Shepherd, “The Covenant Context for Evangelism,” 64f.

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true branches remain connected to the vine, because they are in Christ “inwardly” and savingly. According to Shepherd, the text cannot say this. Shepherd’s interpretation has implications for the doctrine of assurance of salvation. As O. Palmer Robertson observes:

Assurance in a covenant context, although absolute, is an assurance of an election and justification that may be lost. The branches of John 15 which are “cut off” are at first “savingly” grafted into Christ, and subsequently are “cut off” because of a failure to continue abiding in him by way of faith and obedience.⁸¹

John Calvin’s introductory comments on this parable can help a person in properly interpreting John 15:

First, let him remember the rule which ought to be observed in all parables; that we ought not to examine minutely every property of *the vine*, but only to take a general view of the object to which Christ applies that comparison. Now, there are three principal parts; first, that we have no power of doing good but what comes from Himself; secondly, that we, having a root in Him, are dressed and pruned by the Father; thirdly, that He removes the unfruitful branches, that they may be thrown into the fire and burned....

...Christ dwells principally on this, that the vital sap—that is, all life and strength—proceeds from Himself alone. Hence it follows, that the nature of man is unfruitful and destitute of everything good; because no man has the nature of a *vine*, till he be implanted in Him. But this is given to the elect alone by special grace....

As some men corrupt the grace of God, others suppress it maliciously, and others choke it by carelessness, Christ intends by these words to awaken anxious inquiry, by declaring that all *the branches* which shall be unfruitful will be cut off from *the vine*. But here comes a question, Can any one who is ingrafted into Christ be without fruit? I answer, many are supposed to be *in the vine*, according to the opinion of men, who actually have no root *in the vine*. Thus, in the writings of the prophets, the Lord calls the people of Israel *His vine*, because, by outward profession, they had the name of The Church....

⁸¹ Robertson, 8.

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He again [in verse 6] lays before them the punishment of ingratitude, and, by doing so, excites and urges them to perseverance.... Those who are cut off from Christ are said to *wither* like a dead branch; because, as the commencement of strength is from Him, so also is its uninterrupted continuance. Not that it ever happens that any one of the elect is *dried up*, but because there are many hypocrites who, in outward appearance, flourish and are green for a time, but who afterwards, when they ought to yield fruit, show the very opposite of that which the Lord expects and demands from His people.⁸²

In John 15, Jesus describes metaphorically two kinds of people who come into close contact with Christ and who are members of His church on earth: Branches that bear fruit, 15:2b,5,8; and branches that do not bear fruit, 15:2a,6. These two kinds of people are treated in two different ways: Branches that bear fruit are pruned, 15:2b; and branches that do not bear fruit are taken away and burned in fire, 15:2a,6.

Whom do these two sets of metaphors represent? The Gospel of John, which is the context of John 15, gives us the answer. In John's Gospel, those to whom the gospel is preached are divided into two groups: Those who embrace the message by faith, and those who reject it, 1:9,12; 12:35,36. The immediate historical context of John 15 confirms this viewpoint. Judas had just left and was on his way to eternal destruction. Of this, William Hendriksen observes:

Would it not seem natural then that, in speaking of branches that do not bear fruit, are taken away, allowed to wither, picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned, Jesus was thinking of men who, like Judas, had once stood in very close connection with Him, had left Him, and were on their way to everlasting destruction? And again, would it not seem natural that, in speaking of branches that bear fruit, He was thinking of the other disciples, and in general, of all those who by remaining in Him produced much spiritual fruit?⁸³

The parallel passage, John 13, helps us understand the metaphors used in John 15 so as to identify the two groups referred to here. In John 15, Jesus speaks of the fruitful branches as being "clean"—**You are already clean because of the**

⁸² John Calvin, *Commentaries (John)*, Vol. XVIII (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 107, 108, 110.

⁸³ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975), 295.

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Word which I have spoken to you, 15:3. In John 13:10-11, Jesus says to His disciples—**He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you. For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, “not all of you are clean.”** This shows us to whom Jesus had reference when He distinguished between fruitful branches and unfruitful branches that were cut off and burned: (1) The branches that bear fruit and are “clean” represent “all those who not only come into close contact with Christ and the Gospel but also (by God’s sovereign grace and through faith) accept it.”⁸⁴ (2) The branches that do not bear fruit and are burned represent “all the others who have come into close contact with Christ and the Gospel, [but who have not accepted it by faith].”⁸⁵

These two groups of people have one thing in common: they both were in close contact with Christ and the Gospel in the visible church. Both groups of branches were *in the vine*.

That this relation of having been *in the vine*...does not have to refer to the spiritual, saving union with Christ is easy to see. Not all those who are *in* the covenant are *of* the covenant. [Not all those who profess faith in Christ possess faith in Christ.] Not all those who were baptized *into* Moses were saved, I Corinthians 10:1-5.... In no sense whatever do such passages as John 15:2 and 15:6 suggest that there is a falling away from grace, as if those who were once actually saved finally perish. *This allegory plainly teaches that the branches which are taken away and burned represent people who never once bore fruit, not even when they were ‘in’ Christ.* Hence, they never were true believers; and for them the in-the-vine relationship, though close, was merely outward. There is, accordingly, nothing here [in 15:1-11] that clashes in any way with John 10:28. The true believers of John 15 are represented by those branches which, abiding forever in the vine, [in vital union with Christ], bear fruit, more fruit, much fruit. *These never perish!*⁸⁶

Therefore, this parable of the vine and the branches in John 15 does NOT teach that a person can be genuinely, spiritually and vitally in union with Jesus Christ and fail to bear fruit. Baptized unbelievers, who profess to be disciples of Christ, and who are members of the visible church, are NOT as attached to Christ as the fruit-bearing believers are. Both groups do NOT partake of the

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

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vital sap of the Vine. This vital sap does NOT flow to both kinds of branches. Those who are in covenantal and vital union with Christ will never be cut off from the vine. They will always bear fruit for God.

The Westminster Larger Catechism makes this point by distinguishing between the benefits all baptized people receive from membership in the visible church, whether they are true believers or not, and those spiritual blessings which only those church members that are truly united to Christ enjoy.

What is the visible church? A. The visible church is a society made up of all such as in all ages and places of the world do profess the true religion, and of their children. – Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 62

What are the special privileges of the visible church? A. The visible church hath the privilege of being under God's special care and government; of being protected and preserved in all ages, notwithstanding the opposition of all enemies; and of enjoying the communion of saints, the ordinary means of salvation, and offers of grace by Christ to all the members of it in the ministry of the gospel, testifying, that whosoever believes in Him shall be saved, and excluding none that will come unto Him. – Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 63


What is the invisible church? A. The invisible church is the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ the head. – Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 64

What special benefits do the members of the invisible church enjoy by Christ? A. The members of the invisible church by Christ enjoy union and communion with Him in grace and glory. – Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 65

What is that union which the elect have with Christ? A. The union which the elect have with Christ is the work of God's grace, whereby they are spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband; which is done in their effectual calling. – Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 66

What is the communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ? The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is their partaking of the virtue of His mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with Him. – Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 69

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What is the communion in glory which the members of the invisible church have with Christ? A. The communion in glory which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is in this life, immediately after death, and at last perfected at the resurrection and day of judgment.— Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 82.
(See also Q. 83 and 86. )

Appendix II:

The “Visible” and “Invisible” Traits of the Church

The point of the Westminster Standards are making about God’s Church in discussing the invisibility and visibility of the Church is true and well-taken, but the manner in which they make that point is imprecise and potentially misleading, and could be expressed more Biblically.

What is the point of the distinction? The Church of Christ has both the attribute of visibility and the attribute of invisibility. In some aspects it is visible to the human eye – by profession of faith, congregational worship, the marks of a true church, and its government and organization; and in some aspects it is invisible to the human eye – in that it cannot be fully and perfectly comprehended and identified, for no human being can see the human heart. The completed church as it will appear at the very end of history is presently beyond our perception, as well as the number of the elect who are in the visible church. John Murray states the point:

Only God knows completely and infallibly those who are His, those predestined to salvation and ultimately conformed to the image of His Son. The church cannot make a census of the elect nor of the regenerate. Again, the actions of God by which men are made members of the body of Christ are of such a character that they are imperceptible to men. The *fruits* are perceptible, but the actions are in the realm of the heart and spirit of man. We think, for example, of calling and regeneration.... And then, who of men can know the whole company of **the spirits of just men made perfect**? So from many angles our human limitations have to be recognized and these may be expressed by speaking of the church as invisible.⁸⁷

However, we must immediately say that the church, which in some ways is invisible, assumes visible form in history. It “becomes visible in Christian profession and conduct, in the ministry of the Word and of the sacraments, and in external organization and government.”⁸⁸ Although, as the Westminster Confession (WCF 25.4) reminds us: *This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible, Romans 11:3,4, and particular churches, which are members thereof, are more less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances*

⁸⁷ John Murray, *Collected Writings, Vol. I*, (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 231.

⁸⁸ Berkhof, 566.

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administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them, Revelation 2,3; I Corinthians 5:6,7.

Second, the manner in which the church's attribute of "invisibility" is expressed is imprecise and potentially misleading. This visible-invisible description of the church is an old one, used by Augustine and Wycliffe, and was commonly used during the Protestant Reformation; but many of those who have used this description have felt uneasy about it.⁸⁹ The problem is with the phrase *the invisible church*. Is it proper to speak of the invisibility of the church, since the Bible does not distinguish between the visible church and the invisible church? Is better terminology at hand that is less potentially misleading, more enlightening, and more Biblical?

The most severe critic of this mode of expression is the great John Murray, one of the most faithful, scholarly expositors of Reformed theology in the Twentieth Century. His argument:

A rapid survey of New Testament usage will show how frequently the term "church" designates what is visible. The church is the assembly or fellowship of the people of God, constituted by the call of God, a people formed for Himself to show forth His praise and to bear witness to Him in the performance of prescribed functions. The two instances in which our Lord used the term, Matthew 16:18, 18:17 make this clear.... [Matthew 16:18 makes clear that] the church is something to be administered upon earth. It is not an invisible entity but one in which ministry is exercised.... [Matthew 18:17 tells us that] the church must be conceived of as the congregation to which information is to be conveyed.⁹⁰

In the rest of the New Testament, we read of the "church" and of "churches," and repeatedly we find that "concrete as well as discrete visibility is involved."-Murray, 232. (See Acts 8:1; 11:22; I Corinthians 1:2; II Corinthians 1:1; I

⁸⁹ For criticisms of the invisible-visible description of the church by Reformed theologians see: (1) Wilhelms à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service, Vol. II* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), 5f – Seventeenth Century; (2) Thomas Ridgeley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism, Vol. II* (1855; reprint, Edmonton, AB: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993), 4f – Eighteenth Century; (3) Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith* (1845; reprint, Inverness, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications), 261f – Nineteenth Century; (4) John Murray, *Collected Writings, Vol. I*, 231f – Twentieth Century. Douglas Wilson critiques the invisible-visible church distinction in his lectures at the Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference in Monroe, Louisiana, winter, 2002, but his conclusions are different than those of historic Calvinism.

⁹⁰ Murray, *Collected Writings, Vol. I*, 232, 233.

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Thessalonians 1:1; Acts 15:41; 16:5; Romans 16:4; I Corinthians 4:17; Galatians 1:21,22; Revelation 1:4.) From such phrases as **all the churches**, Romans 16:16; I Corinthians 14:33; II Corinthians 11:28, and from such verses as I Corinthians 11:16 and 14:34, we learn, as Murray puts it, that “the church throughout the world is not to be thought of apart from the particular components that make up the church universal, and, therefore, not apart from the visibility characterizing these components.”⁹¹ In other words, the church is comprised of churches, Acts 8:1-3; 9:1,2,31; Galatians 1:13,22; Philippians 3:6; I Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 1:22; 4:23,25. In fact, the church “extends beyond the confines of this age and has its outreach to the age to come, Ephesians 3:21; 5:27.... [In such texts] the church glorified is contemplated. But when this age gives place to the age to come and the whole body of Christ is perfected, we may not think of the church as invisible. It will be consummated in visibility.”⁹² Murray continues:

These considerations suffice to show that it is impossible to disassociate the church visible from the relevance and application of the various propositions in these contexts. Hence, even in those passages in which the concept of the “church invisible” might appear to be present, the case is rather that there is no evidence for the notion of the “church” as an invisible entity distinct from the church visible. ...there are those aspects pertaining to the church that may be characterized as invisible. But it is to “the church” those aspects pertain, and “the church” in the New Testament never appears as an invisible entity and therefore may never be *defined* in terms of invisibility. This is why, at an earlier point, the advisability of the use of the actual term “invisible” has been questioned. It is a term that is liable to be loaded with the misconceptions inherent in the concept “invisible church,” and tends to support the abuses incident thereto. Other terms can more appropriately and safely be used to express these various aspects or attributes which have been characterized as invisible.⁹³

In what sense is the phrase, *the invisible church*, misleading, and how has the idea been abused? Many have assumed that this terminology implies two churches: an invisible church and a visible church, with two different membership rolls. But, such an idea is totally foreign to the Bible that speaks of the unity and catholicity of Christ’s one church. If Christ is the Bridegroom and His church is

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 232-233.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 234.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 234f.

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His Bride, to have two churches is to have two brides, making Jesus a bigamist! As Robert Shaw points out:

When we speak of the visible and invisible Church, this is not to be understood as if there were two Churches, or as if one part of the Church were visible and another invisible. The former includes the latter, but they are not co-extensive; the same individuals who constitute the Church considered as invisible, belong also to the Church considered as visible; but many who belong to the visible, are not comprehended in the invisible Church.⁹⁴

One may not divide the church into a visible and invisible church. One and the same person is invisible as far as the soul, will, intellect, and affections are concerned, and he is visible as far as his body and motions are concerned. As one person cannot be divided into an invisible and a visible person, one may not divide the church into a visible and invisible church, for then it would seem as if there were two churches, each being a different church. One may also not divide the church into a visible and invisible church as far as the members are concerned, as if the one had different members from the other.⁹⁵

Because many have assumed that the invisible church and visible church are two churches with two different memberships, we have seen a decline from the truth of the gospel and the institutions of Christ on many levels, along with a disregard for the “visible, institutional, organized church.” Too often active membership in the organized church manifested in local congregations is seen as unnecessary and is even mocked by many. Membership in the “invisible church” has been sufficient justification for some not to seek membership in the “visible church,” for, they reason, the “invisible church” is the more important and spiritual of the two, and the “visible church” is so corrupt anyway. Murray shows the error of this:

In the absence of unity and fellowship in the denomination [visible church], comfort is derived from the unity and fellowship supposed to exist in the “church invisible.” It is true that there is unity and fellowship in the body of Christ for all who are united to Him, a fellowship that crosses denominational boundaries, and one the

⁹⁴ Robert Shaw, 261.

⁹⁵ Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service, Vol. II* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1992), 6.

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privileges and obligations of which are to be fully recognized and cultivated. The appreciation and cultivation of this fellowship, however, devolve upon all believers under all circumstances and cannot be regarded as a resort or substitute under the special conditions now being considered.

With respect to the comfort derived from the idea of the “church invisible,” a few things have to be said. The concept of the “church invisible” is, to say the least, far too precarious upon which to build for the fulfillment of the obligation incumbent upon us to foster unity and fellowship in the church of God. Suffice it to ask: where in the New Testament do we find the “invisible church” as an institution in which we may exercise in any concrete and practical way the fellowship claimed?

When Paul enjoined upon believers all diligence **to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace**, Ephesians 4:3, he was surely thinking of the relations that obtain within the church in its visible character and expression, Philippians 4:2. This is demonstrated in Ephesians 4:7, for there the thought is the distribution and diversity of grace in the church. The charge he gives is for harmony in the unity of faith, v. 5. It should be apparent how alien to this obligation is escape to the idea of the “church invisible.” It is to desert the practical for an outlet without warrant, and one that fails to provide the means for keeping **the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace**.⁹⁶

Most certainly, the Westminster fathers themselves would today share our misgivings about the “visible-invisible” approach to understanding the church of God. To be fair to them, we should point out why they expressed themselves in this manner, distinguishing but not separating *the invisible church* from *the visible church*. They were attempting to distance the Biblical and Reformed doctrine of the church from that of the Roman Catholic teaching:

The [Roman] Catholic Church is the true Church founded by Jesus Christ, which can be known by these characteristics together: loyalty to the Pope and bishops joined with him; oneness in the truths to be believed and the

⁹⁶ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, 235-236.

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moral code to be followed; oneness in worship: the Sacrifice of the Mass, and the means to holiness, the seven sacraments.⁹⁷

According to this viewpoint, the Roman Catholic Church is the true church, which is absolutely visible in its professed subjection to the Roman Papacy and to the practices, rituals and traditions of that Roman Catholic Church.

Not every baptized member of the churches of Christ is in union with Christ, nor is every baptized member regenerated and justified. Not all members are believers, and not all are elect.⁹⁸ And yet, *the visible church* in history can be designated *the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God* (WCF 25.2). How is this so? Because of the organic existence of the church, the entire membership of the church is called by the names that belong properly only to the elect kernel of the church. Herman Hoeksema writes:

God has a people in this world which is called Israel, which bears the name of the children of God. That people exists organically and develops in the line of the generations of believers. It must be called by the name of God's people. They with their children are called the church, the congregation of Jesus Christ. God's covenant people, Israel. They are called saints in Christ Jesus, beloved in the Lord. As such they must also be treated, according to the will of the Lord. They must be circumcised in the old dispensation, baptized in the new covenant. As the people of the covenant they must be treated in preaching and in instruction. Such is the teaching of Scripture. Thus God Himself always addresses the people of Israel. Thus the apostles write to the congregation of the New Testament day.... They are called saints in Christ Jesus. But now let no one draw the conclusion from that that all who are in the sphere of the this church as it exists historically are also actually spiritual children of the promise. There is an Israel according to the flesh and an Israel according to the Spirit....

But let it be emphasized once more that it is according to Holy Scripture to call the whole of the organism of the congregation

⁹⁷ *Basic Catechism* of the Roman Catholic Church, 61.

⁹⁸ The Belgic Confession of Faith, Article 27, defines the holy catholic Church as *a congregation of true Christian believers*. Wilhelmus à Brakel makes an interesting comment on this statement: "The unconverted, even though they have made confession of faith, have been accepted into the fellowship of the church, live without offense, and have been admitted to the use of the sacraments, the unconverted, I repeat, are not true members of the church. This is so whether the church is viewed in her internal, spiritual condition or in her public gatherings whereby she manifests herself externally to the world."- *The Christian's Reasonable Service, Vol. II, 9.*

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according to the name of the elect kernel, the remnant according to the election of grace. And since then it is also a certainty for the church on earth that some branches will never bear fruit, therefore the pruning-knife of discipline must be used in order to cut out such branches.⁹⁹

The clear and strong language of the Baptism Form of Dutch Reformed churches is possible, not because it is true of every baptized member of the church, but because the whole church is called by the name of the elect kernel. Therefore, all baptized members of the church are not in fact the saved elect of God, but because the elect of God are in the church, all who make credible professions of faith and are baptized into the church, with their children, are to be considered as the saved elect people of Christ, unless by their lives they prove apostate and are excommunicated. Hoeksema, again:

Holy baptism witnesseth and sealeth unto us the washing away of our sins through Jesus Christ. Therefore we are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. For when we are baptized in the name of the Father, God and Father witnesseth and sealeth unto us, that He doth make an eternal covenant of grace with us, and adopts us for His children and heirs, and therefore will provide us with every good thing and avert all evil or turn it to our profit. And when we are baptized in the name of the Son, the Son sealeth unto us, that He doth wash us in His blood from all our sins, incorporating us into the fellowship of His death and resurrection, so that we are freed from all our sins, and accounted righteous before God. In like manner, when we are baptized in the name of the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost assures us, by this holy sacrament, that He will dwell in us, and sanctify us to be members of Christ, applying unto us that which we have in Christ, namely, the washing away of our sins, and the daily renewing of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without spot or wrinkle among the assembly of the elect in life eternal.

And if we sometimes through weakness fall into sin, we must not therefore despair of God's mercy, nor continue in sin, since baptism is a seal and undoubted testimony, that we have an eternal covenant of grace with God.¹⁰⁰ ∞

⁹⁹ Hoeksema, 109-111.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 99-100.