

## **“THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM.”**

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**Belgic Confession, Article 34**

**Scripture Text: Matthew 28:18-20**

### **Introduction**

The story is told of King Louis IX who reigned over France from 1226 to 1270. He was a godly king often referred to as Saint Louis. The city St. Louis is named after him. He was asked what was the greatest day of his life. Expecting him to say the day of his coronation at the age of 12 or the day of his marriage to princess Margaret, he surprised everyone when he answered, “The day of my baptism.”

How many of us if asked that question before today would have ever thought to answer, “The day of my baptism.”?

### **Circumcision verses Baptism.**

Article 34 starts by taking us back to the OT and to circumcision, the sign given for inclusion in the covenant of God as one of God’s people. It was a blood sacrament that God commanded be given to all Jewish males.

In the NT the blood sacrament is exchanged for a water sacrament. Jesus commands it be given to all believers. But it’s a picture of another OT action, the crossing through the Red Sea by the people of Israel. This was their baptism, their initiation as an infant nation, a people belonging to God. The people of Israel were baptized into Moses, they were separated from the people of Egypt. Jesus Christ is our Red Sea.

Christ fulfilled and abolished the bloody rites of animal sacrifice and circumcision by shedding His own blood once for all. Christ is the end of the Law because He is the fulfillment of the Law. He perfectly obeyed all of it and perfectly kept it and was the first and only man ever to do so. There is no more need for an altar, and there never should be one in any church. The one necessary sacrifice has already been made.

### **Baptism and its Benefits.**

Baptism is the external, visible sign that marks our identity as a follower or disciple of Jesus Christ. Baptism is our logo, our school color, our mark of allegiance and loyalty. Baptism declares whose side we are on.

Baptism is the sign of our initiation into the church of Jesus Christ. Some churches show this in a very tangible way by placing the baptismal font at the bottom of the steps in front of the communion table or out in the narthex at the entrance into the sanctuary.

**Baptism includes the following:**

- The external, visible sign which is the water.
- The internal, invisible thing signified which is the sprinkling of the blood of Christ, the washing away of sin and of the old man, and the quickening of the new man by the Holy Spirit to newness of life all by grace through faith.
- The words of institution including the Trinitarian formula and the promise of Christ which the sign confirms.

Baptism is a sign and seal of our identity. It's the sign that says we no longer belong to the world, but that now we belong to Christ. Once we were not a people now we are a people.

Baptism is a sign and seal of the forgiveness of our sins and the righteousness that is now ours in Christ Jesus. The sin that separates us from God is signified as removed.

As Article 34 says:

*In this way he signifies to us that just as water washes away the dirt of the body when it is poured on us and also is seen on the body of the baptized when it is sprinkled on him, so too the blood of Christ does the same thing internally, in the soul, by the Holy Spirit. It washes and cleanses it from its sins and transforms us from being the children of wrath into the children of God.*

Baptism is a sign and seal of our purification, of the putting off of the old nature and the putting on of the new nature.

*... washing, purifying, and cleansing our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving us true assurance of his fatherly goodness; clothing us with the "new man" and stripping off the "old," with all its works.*

**Matthew 28:18-20.**

Let's take a closer look at our text.

**Matthew 28:18** And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

There are **four points** we want to make from this text regarding baptism.

**First, All nations**, not just one nation. The new covenant is open to all peoples, all ethnē. Baptism is binding on all peoples from all nations who would be ingrafted into the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. Our identity is not defined by race, by skin color, by national boundaries, we are identified by the blood of Jesus.

Paul is talking about us when he writes in Ephesians:

**Ephesians 2:11** Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, ... were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. **13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **14** For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

Do you hear the grace of the good news in that? You might miss it since we are 2000 years away from what really happened then. You and I were separated from God, total strangers to the covenants of promise. We had no hope and we were without God. Completely cut off, outside of grace and of salvation. But Christ by His blood and Spirit broke down the dividing wall and has grafted us into the vine, and has adopted us into the family of God.

How can we appreciate the gift if we don't feel the alienation? How can we savor the sweetness of our salvation if we don't know how separated we were by race and by sin? How can we appreciate the miracle of our baptism that we have been included?

**Second, Baptize them** is the command to all who are disciples. Those who are taught and discipled and who dedicate themselves to follow Christ, to those the command is given, **baptize them**, them and their household.

As Peter says in Acts 2, repent and be baptized. **Acts 2:39** For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

Water baptism doesn't regenerate, it doesn't save, it doesn't even cleanse us, but it points to the One who does. Baptism isn't necessary for salvation, but it is necessary for obedience to Christ, since He commanded all who believe to be baptized. It's not optional or insignificant.

**Third**, Baptize them with the words of institution given by Christ, **in the name of** the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This tells us two things.

**First**, the sacrament is instituted by the command and authority of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**Second**, we are being received into the family of the triune God, we have the favor and blessing of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They will give to us all the benefits of baptism. We will be

washed by the blood of Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, and given the Spirit of adoption that we might say, “Abba, Father.”

We will accept into the fellowship and membership of this church any one who has been baptized in a Christian church in the name of the Trinity. We will re-baptize only those who have been baptized only in the name of Jesus and those who have been baptized in a cult like the Mormons.

And *fourth, teaching them to observe* all that I have commanded. There are vows, there is a response, there is a commitment on our part to obey our head, to listen and learn, to be teachable and to walk by faith.

When we are marked with the sign and seal of baptism we become part of that body of people over whom Christ is the head, and that is a serious thing.

When the mark of Christ is placed on a person they have a holy obligation to repent, to believe, and to live their life in a way that faithfully reflects Christ and points to Him.

Our baptism confesses Christ, so must we.

Our baptism points to Christ, so must we.

Our baptism reflects the grace of the gospel, so must we.

Our baptism says something true about Christ, so must we.

Our life and testimony must faithfully and fruitfully line up with the reality of which our baptism speaks, or we are covenant breakers.

### **Application and conclusion:**

How well do we bear the mark of our baptism and our identity in Christ? I want us to focus on one particular sentence of Article 34, a sentence you may not have thought much about before.

*Yet this baptism is profitable not only when the water is on us and when we receive it but throughout our entire lives.*

How can we benefit from our baptism throughout our entire lives? Someone once said that all our lives we should work to improve our baptism. What does that mean? How can we improve our baptism? Must we go back and be baptized again and do it better somehow? Should we change who did it or who was there or what was said at the time? Do we improve it by getting some water from the Jordan River?

How can we remember and improve our baptism? What value or benefit does your baptism have for you today?

Baptism is not just a sprinkling, it's deep water. The benefits of our baptism don't just end once the water has dried, they continue all our life as we recall it to mind.

By recalling to mind our baptism we are not trying to recall to our minds the experience of it, but rather to recall to our minds the meaning of it. What did Jesus accomplish for us and what are the benefits that are ours in Christ?

Several years ago J.I. Packer outlined seven ways believers should reflect on and improve our baptism.

First, "it was a gospel service, in which 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith' (Romans 1:16) was set forth in symbol." Your baptism symbolized death to sin and resurrection to new life. So, "my baptism assures me that each day I may know more of supernatural deliverance from evil."

Second, "my baptism was a marriage service, in which I was given away to Jesus my Lord to be his covenant-partner." So my baptism reminds me of the love and loyalty I owe to him, and his promise to cherish me and share with me all that he has.

Third, "my baptism was a burial service," as Romans 6:4-6 makes clear. So I must always "by the Spirit put to death the deeds of the body." (Romans 8:12ff)

Fourth, "my baptism was an Easter festival, proclaiming both Jesus' resurrection and mine, as a believer, in and with his." Though I have to wait for Christ's return to experience the physical resurrection, "my baptism requires me to show forth day by day the Christ-life which now courses through me, while at the same time confirming to me that a new and better body will be mine."

Fifth, "my baptism was a birthday celebration." And so "my baptism should teach me constant joy at being spiritually alive in Christ."

Sixth, "my baptism was an admission ceremony, bringing me into the family of God's adopted children so that I might share the family life of worship, witness, and work for our Father's glory."

Seventh, "my baptism was a commissioning service, entering me upon a life wholly given to serve Christ and his cause."

Every morning when you wake up, remind yourself, "I am baptized." In the face of great temptations and in the face of great trials tell yourself, "I am baptized, I bear the mark of Jesus Christ, I belong to Him and He belongs to me. If He is for me then who can be against me?"

Martin Luther used to say to himself, "Martin, remember your baptism."

When the world seem dark, when the stress was building and life was pressing in from all sides and when everything was going wrong and friends were abandoning him or letting him down or attacking him, when all else failed and everyone else failed, he would say, “Martin, remember your baptism.”

That was his anchor in every storm; that was his ballast that would right his ship; that was his firm foundation. Improve your baptism by remembering all it signifies for you in Christ.

**Prayer:**

“Almighty and eternal God, according to Your strict judgment You condemned the unbelieving world through the flood, yet according to Your great mercy You preserved believing Noah and his family, eight souls in all. You drowned hard-hearted Pharaoh and all his host in the Red Sea, yet led Your people Israel through the water on dry ground, prefiguring this washing of Your Holy Baptism.

Through the Baptism in the Jordan of Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, You sanctified and instituted all waters to be a blessed flood, and a lavish washing away of sin.

We pray that You would behold us according to Your boundless mercy and bless us with true faith by the Holy Spirit that through this saving flood all our sin which has been inherited from Adam and which we have committed since would be drowned and die.

Grant that we be kept safe and secure in the holy ark of the Christian Church, being separated from the multitude of unbelievers and serving Your name at all times with a fervent spirit and a joyful hope, so that, with all believers in Your promise, we would be declared worthy of eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.” (Martin Luther’s Great Flood Prayer for Baptism).

Father, in every circumstance and situation, in every unsettling moment, help us to remember your faithfulness to us and help us to grab hold of our baptism, that our lives are built on the solid rock foundation of Christ. Amen.