

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 2

Baptism: Contradictions in Creeds, Part 1

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Episode Summary

In the first podcast episode on baptism, I made the comment that many well-known Christian creeds are internally contradictory when it comes to articulating the clear gospel (salvation by faith in Christ apart from any work or merit of our own) and baptism. That might seem hard to swallow, but it's true. In this episode, I illustrate the problem via the Belgic Confession, whose clear description of the gospel turns to muddled thinking when it comes to the section on baptism.

Transcript

Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast. In the previous podcast, I briefly introduced the topic of baptism. After defining some terms, I used Paul's link between baptism and circumcision in Colossians 2:11-12 to briefly illustrate the kinds of trouble denominational articulations of baptism produce, since Paul's linking of these two items demands that what we say about one, we need to be able to say about the other. This is especially crucial when it comes to any doctrine of infant baptism, since honoring this interpretive requirement shows the illogic of a lot of what is said by various creeds and denominations about infant baptism. But I'll go even further. It also demonstrates that a lot of what is said about infant baptism has no basis in the biblical text, but as we'll see, that doesn't invalidate the idea per se. You can construct a biblical theology of infant baptism. It's just that the creeds that we often use really confuse things.

Lest listeners think I'm being a little bit too critical, in the next few podcasts I'll be going directly to some well-known Protestant creeds to illustrate the confusion created within those creeds in regard to what is said about salvation by grace through faith and infant baptism, and baptism in general. Having been a church member in the past in the Reformed tradition, I can tell you first-hand that laypeople (and even pastors) have great difficulty resolving the internal contradictions of their own creeds. Part of the problem is that few people actually read them thoughtfully and critically. When I've asked Reformed pastors if they can justifiably say the same things about circumcision and Old Testament salvation that their creeds say about baptism and its effect on the recipient, I have yet to find any that would feel comfortable doing so. I've also never found

any who have attempted the exercise seriously. To say the least, that's disappointing.

Let's start by looking at the Belgic Confession--a creed to which many Reformed churches subscribe. I'll be reading several passages and adding my own comments to help us focus on the problems.

Article 22: Our Justification Through Faith in Christ

We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, appropriates Him, and seeks nothing more besides Him. For it must needs follow, either that all things which are requisite to our salvation are not in Jesus Christ, or if all things are in Him, that then those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him.

Now, the important phrasing here is that believers "possess Jesus Christ through faith." It's a clear statement of the Gospel. But let's continue:

Therefore, for any to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something more is required besides Him, would be too gross a blasphemy; for hence it would follow that Christ was but half a Savior.

So, salvation is through Christ alone. Good. How does one get that salvation? Well, by possessing Christ through faith. That's good again. Let's go back to the Creed:

5:00

Therefore we justly say with Paul, that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith apart from works. However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits, and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness. And faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits, which, when they become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.

This article basically tells us that faith is the conduit through which the benefits of Christ's work come to the believer. We are saved by His merit, not our work... no merit of our own. The creed is very clear here about the Gospel and salvation. But watch how muddled things become when we hit the section on baptism.

Belgic Confession, Article 34: Holy Baptism

We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law, has made an end, by the shedding of His blood, of all other sheddings of

blood which men could or would make as a propitiation or satisfaction for sin; and that He, having abolished circumcision, which was done with blood, has instituted the sacrament of baptism instead thereof; by which we are received into the Church of God, and separated from all other people and strange religions, that we may wholly belong to Him whose mark and ensign we bear; and which serves as a testimony to us that He will forever be our gracious God and Father.

This part of the creed says plainly that those who are baptized belong to Christ. Anyone who knows even a little bit about the Reformed tradition knows that it, of course, practices infant baptism. One problem is now obvious: every Reformed church member or pastor knows someone who was baptized but who later forsook the faith. How is it, then, that this part of the Belgic Confession can be considered coherent? But there's another problem: just how does baptism make us "belong" to Christ? Is the intended meaning that baptism accomplishes this status--that is, it puts us in Christ (which the New Testament equates with salvation), or is it something else?

This idea that baptism accomplishes the status of being in Christ would contradict what we just read in the Confession about salvation by grace through faith. Is the intended meaning, alternatively, that baptism only sort of "marks" those who belong to Christ? This idea would make baptism a sort of identifier of those who are elect and who will believe, and so baptism has some connection to those who are in Christ anyway. But then, how is it that people who are baptized can drift away from the faith? Were they mismarked? If that's the case, then baptism as a rite has no efficacy for sure, but it also isn't a completely accurate indicator of the Elect, either. So what good is it? The real question, of course, is whether any of this is biblical. Recall that one of our tests for that was whether the idea honors Paul's connection between baptism and circumcision. Can we coherently say about circumcision what the creed says about baptism to this point? No, we can't. We have the same set of problems. But there's more in the creed that is a concern. Let's keep going. Same article on Holy Baptism.

Therefore He has commanded all those who are His to be baptized with pure water...

We believe, therefore, that every man who is earnestly studious of obtaining life eternal ought to be baptized but once with this only baptism, without ever repeating the same, since we cannot be born twice. Neither does this baptism avail us only at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life.

10:00 Wow! Several problems here. First of all, why do we need "pure" water? Does this water do something to the recipient that normal water wouldn't? And what in the world is it saying by suggesting that if we get baptized more than once, we're

born again more than once, and that the water of baptism does not "avail us" only when we get wet as babies but through the whole course of our life? This language about baptism suggests a strong link between the act of baptism and salvation (spiritual birth). And that's the problem. If anything is connected to saving faith, then we cannot claim faith alone saves us. This violates the Gospel and the Confession's own earlier really clear articulation of the Gospel. I can't see any other way to take the wording here. There seem to be some pretty stark oppositions. At best, the wording of the creed is theologically careless. And it's not the only familiar Reformed creed that has that problem.

In the next Naked Bible Podcast, we're going to be going through the same exercise, except next time we'll take a look at the confusion in the Heidelberg Catechism.