

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 3

Baptism: Contradictions in Creeds, Part 2

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Episode Summary

In the previous episode, we saw how the Belgic Confession was, in places, clear on its articulation of the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone. And yet when it discussed baptism, these ideas were muddled, creating theological confusion. This episode details more of the same, this time in the Heidelberg Catechism.

Transcript

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast. In the last podcast episode, I noted the confusion that can be created in the minds of readers of the Belgic Confession—confusion over the gospel due to statements that appear to connect baptism with salvation in some way. This time, as we continue talking about baptism, we'll look at the Heidelberg Catechism. It's important to keep in mind that the reason I'm doing this is that I've had lay people read these documents and emerge very confused. They know the gospel going in and are left wondering why in the world the creeds say what they do coming out. They read clearly on the gospel in one part, and then they say things about baptism that sound like they violate the gospel. The poor wording is a very real source of confusion for people who aren't theological experts. And, frankly, the experts are so married to the creed via denominationalism that they're left to defend the confused wording—poorly, in many cases.

Let's look at the Catechism now. It's structured in the form of questions. Heidelberg Catechism, Question 60:

Q. 60.

How are thou righteous before God?

A.

Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; (a)

so that,

though my conscience accuse me,

that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God,

and kept none of them, (b)

and am still inclined to all evil; (c)

notwithstanding, God,

without any merit of mine, (d)
 but only of mere grace, (e)
 grants and imputes to me, (f)
 the perfect satisfaction, (g)
 righteousness and holiness of Christ; (h)
 even so, as if I never had had, nor committed any sin:
 yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience
 which Christ has accomplished for me; (i)
 inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart. (j)

(a) Rom.3:21-25,28; Rom.5:1,2; Gal.2:16; Eph.2:8,9; Philip.3:9. (b)
 Rom.3:9. (c) Rom.7:23. (d) Tit.3:5; Deut.9:6; Ezek.36:22. (e)
 Rom.3:24; Eph.2:8. (f) Rom.4:4,5; 2 Cor.5:19. (g) 1 John 2:2. (h)
 1 John 2:1. (i) 2 Cor.5:21. (j) Rom.3:22; John 3:18.

Now that's a pretty succinct articulation of the biblical gospel. There's no confusion there. So we move on to Question 61:

Q. 61.
 Why sayest thou,
 that thou art righteous by faith only?

A.
 Not that I am acceptable to God,
 on account of the worthiness of my faith;
 but because
 only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ,
 is my righteousness before God; (a)
 and that I cannot receive and apply the same to myself
 any other way than by faith only. (b)

(a) 1 Cor.1:30; 1 Cor.2:2. (b) 1 John 5:10.

Moving to Question 65:

Q. 65.
 Since then we are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits
 by faith only,
 whence does this faith proceed?

A.
 From the Holy Ghost, (a)
 who works faith in our hearts
 by the preaching of the gospel,
 and confirms it
 by the use of the sacraments. (b)

(a) Eph.2:8,9; Eph.6:23; John 3:5; Philip.1:29. (b) Matt.28:19,20; 1 Pet.1:22,23.

There's a lot of clarity in there, but you have to wonder here what it means that the Holy Ghost "confirms" the faith he gives by the sacraments. Do infants exercise faith when they're baptized? It's hard for me to believe the Catechism would presume that. Reformed theology will, of course, seek to honor the connection between circumcision and baptism, but there's no scriptural affirmation that Abraham's children believed when they were circumcised (or anyone's children believed when circumcised when they're eight days old). If one retreats to the idea that parents can believe for the infant, this fails in two respects: one, that it isn't confirmed in the Catechism's statements about salvation by faith and two, it's not affirmed anywhere in the Bible, either. The confusion mounts when we look at what the Catechism says about the sacrament of baptism specifically. We start with Heidelberg Catechism Question 66 in that regard.

Q. 66.

What are the sacraments?

A.

The sacraments are holy visible signs and seals, appointed of God for this end, that by the use thereof, he may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel, viz., that he grants us freely the remission of sin, and life eternal, for the sake of that one sacrifice of Christ, accomplished on the cross. (a)

(a) Gen.17:11; Rom.4:11; Deut.30:6; Lev.6:25; Heb.9:7-9,24; Ezek.20:12; Isa.6:6,7; Isa.54:9.

It's interesting wording here, and very common wording in sacramental theology. Sacraments are "signs" and "seals." I get the sign part. The sacrament is like a picture or analogy of some greater spiritual reality or point. But then we have problems. What does it mean that the sacrament declares and "seals to us" the promise of the gospel, the remission of sin, life eternal for the sake of the sacrifice of Christ? What does that mean? Is this wording saying that all who are baptized (especially as infants) have the remission of sins sealed to them? Sure sounds like it! I have to wonder how that is the case, given the clear articulation of the gospel that preceded this section in the Heidelberg Catechism. Those in Reformed circles, it seems to me, can pretty easily keep the gospel and baptism separate when talking about signs or analogies, but when you use words like

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"sealing," it suggests something is accomplished and guaranteed through baptism—and that is theologically dangerous. Again, think back to earlier podcast episodes we've already had about my emphasis on "if you say something about baptism, you ought to be able to say it about circumcision, and vice versa." If they're connected, the language needs to be consistent and the theology needs to be consistent.

Let's go on to Question 67.

Q. 67.

Are both word and sacraments, then,
ordained and appointed for this end,
that they may direct our faith
to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross,
as the only ground of our salvation? (a)

A.

Yes, indeed:
for the Holy Ghost teaches us in the gospel,
and assures us by the sacraments,
that the whole of our salvation
depends upon that one sacrifice of Christ
which he offered for us on the cross.

(a) Rom.6:3; Gal.3:27.

This wording is a little better, but it still raises questions. The sacraments "direct our faith" to Christ. Well, what does that mean? Is it a pointer, as in, "Oh, I see. That's what I'm supposed to believe to have eternal life." Or is it some sort of spiritual kick-start to move us toward the gospel? If it does that, why does it fail when people don't believe or when they apostasize (they give up their faith)? That's a nice way of saying, "What good is it if it has no guarantee?" And if it doesn't do that, why not be clearer in what is written? In other words, why not be more clear in what it *does* do?

On to Question 71 in the Catechism:

Q. 71.

Where has Christ promised us,
that he will as certainly wash us
by his blood and Spirit,
as we are washed with the water of baptism?

A.

In the institution of baptism, which is thus expressed:
"Go ye, therefore,
and teach all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the
the

Holy Ghost", Matt.28:19.

And

"he that believeth, and is baptized, shall be saved;

but he that believeth not, shall be damned.", Mark 16:16.

This promise is also repeated, where the scripture calls baptism
"the washing of regenerations" and the washing away of sins.

Tit.3:5,

Acts 22:16. (a)

(a) Tit.3:5; Acts 22:16.

Now we have some problems. The Titus 3:5 reference is not only taken completely out of context here, it is even misquoted. Here's the full verse and the surrounding text from Titus. Verse 4:

⁴But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

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Now that was Titus 3:4-7. It gives you some context for verse 5. What saves us is the washing of the Holy Spirit, not the washing of the water. There's actually no water in those verses! The Acts 22:16 reference is also partially quoted. Here's the full verse and the surrounding context. This is Acts 22:12-16:

¹²“And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him.¹⁴ And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; ¹⁵for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.¹⁶ And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

Who is being baptized here? It's Paul. (His former name was Saul.) When Paul gives his testimony in scripture, does he refer to his baptism at the hand of Ananias or his confrontation with the risen Christ that preceded it? It's always the latter. When God speaks to Ananias to tell him to go baptize Paul, God makes it

clear that he has already chosen Paul. Ananias himself says in Acts 9:17, these words:

... **“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”**

Ananias refers to Saul as "brother" before his baptism. Without belaboring the point, Paul had already had his conversion experience before baptism, right on the Damascus Road. Frankly, I know of no tradition that questions this, but I thought I should mention it, since, when Paul is baptized we have the line about "rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name." This isn't as difficult as it seems or has been made. If the verse only said "rise and be baptized and wash away your sins" it would be more problematic, but it includes "calling on his (Jesus') name," which is how Paul describes his confession of faith and the confession of faith of others in Romans 10:10-13. In this instance, the recipient of baptism knows the gospel already and makes profession of faith along with baptism. It isn't baptism that saves. It's the profession of faith in Christ. In Paul's case, it was the encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Infants cannot do this. As for those who can do this, the theological question is simple. In all of Scripture's explanations of the gospel, which is the indispensable element: faith in the saving work of Christ or water baptism? The answer is pretty obvious. Yes, water baptism marked believers and was a rite that analogized an inner spiritual reality, but one could believe without it and one isn't going to heaven without faith in Christ. The latter is the gospel.

Using Acts 22:16 to somehow suggest that water baptism triggers forgiveness is theologically irresponsible and ignores a great deal of context and content in the New Testament. It's difficult to believe how wrong the Heidelberg Catechism gets this point, but it gets even murkier. Listen to Question 74:

Q. 74.

Are infants also to be baptized?

A.

Yes:

for since they,

as well as the adult,

are included in the covenant and church of God; (a)

and since redemption from sin (b)

by the blood of Christ,

and the Holy Ghost,

the author of faith,

is promised to them no less than to the adult; (c)

they must therefore by baptism,

as a sign of the covenant,
be also admitted into the christian church;
and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers (d)
as was done in the old covenant or testament
by circumcision, (e)
instead of which baptism is instituted (f)
in the new covenant.

(a) Gen.17:7. (b) Matt.19:14. (c) Luke 1:15; Ps.22:10;
Isa.44:1-3;
Acts 2:39. (d) Acts 10:47. (e) Gen.17:14. (f) Col.2:11-13.

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No kidding! Redemption is promised to the whole world, but how can a staunch Calvinist say that? (That's a question for another podcast.) We all begin as children. If you're a Five Point Calvinist, you must take this wording as only true of the elect, and that raises another problem. Why, then, do baptized people in Bible-believing Reformed Calvinistic churches go astray? How can the elect apostasize? This is the sort of theological dilemma I referred to in the very first episode of the podcast. For Calvinists who practice infant baptism, either their doctrine of baptism needs rethinking or their ideas about the perseverance of the elect need to be scrapped. You can't have it both ways.

But here are some responses I've actually read or heard from Reformed pastors and writers: "Well, if the infant's parents are believers, the baptized infant doesn't need to believe. The infant is part of the covenant relationship, passed on by believing parents." Now think about that. So if the faith of the parents is what really matters, then what's the point of describing baptism this way? More significantly, it doesn't answer the question! Sure, the infant gets baptized and is in the covenant, so why did they apostasize again? It also doesn't address the situation where adults are baptized who didn't have believing parents and then the baptized adult ends up forsaking the faith. Frankly, this is just a response that avoids the issue, unless you want to say that people who reject the faith still go to heaven because of what someone else believes.

I've also heard something like this: "Baptism isn't supposed to work for the non-elect." So tell me, just how is that like circumcision again? How did circumcision work when it came to salvation? The answer is that it didn't work at all and wasn't intended to be a ticket to salvation. Israel as a nation was elect and all Jewish males were to be circumcised. No one was more Jewish than other Jewish people, and yet most of the nation apostasized. Honestly, the logic here is just horrible.

It seems to me we have some choices to make in response. Maybe baptism accomplishes nothing. Or maybe the elect may not end up elect—meaning that election and salvation are two separate ideas. Now, any of those alternatives (all of them, frankly) contradict the Catechism's wording. Remember, the reason I'm going through this exercise is to show how confused the wording of the creeds

are with respect to baptism. They are confused because they fail to recognize the need to say only about baptism what one can coherently and biblically say about circumcision. Once you blow that assignment, your thinking is going to be hopelessly muddled and inconsistent. Unfortunately, it doesn't get any better with the Westminster Confession. That's the one we'll be taking a look at in the next episode of the Naked Bible Podcast.