

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 4

Baptism: Contradictions in Creeds, Part 3

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Contradictions over baptism and salvation in creeds, continued (Part 3).

In the previous episode, we saw how the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechisms offered muddled, contradictory statements on salvation by grace through faith and what happens at baptism. This episode details more of the same, this time in the Westminster Confession.

Transcript

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast. In the previous episode of the podcast, we looked at the Heidelberg Catechism and its confusing statements about salvation only by grace through faith and what it says baptism accomplishes. While the catechism affirmed the former, its clarity in that regard was marred by careless statements about baptism that followed.

In this episode, we'll look at the same sort of problematic language in parts of the Westminster Confession. Our procedure will be that I will give the chapter heading of the Confession and then read its content and then offer some commentary.

So let's get started. Chapter 11 (XI) of the Westminster Confession: "Of Justification."

I. Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.

Now that's a very clear statement on the exclusive nature of justification apart from any human act. The next paragraph of the Confession begins by reinforcing the first, but then manages to snatch confusion from the jaws of clarity.

II. Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.

This is sort of curious wording. One wonders what is meant by "other saving graces," especially since baptism is viewed as a sacrament later in the confession. Let's move to the sixth point in this section of the Confession.

VI. The justification of believers under the Old Testament was, in all these respect, one and the same with the justification of believers under the New Testament.

So, justification worked the same way under the Old Testament as the New Testament. This is very important, and I'll come back to it in my criticisms of the baptism language. Let's go there now. Chapter 27 (XXVII) of the Westminster Confession: "Of the Sacraments."

I. Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him: as also to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.

II. 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.

5:00

Now think about what I just read: "The names and effects of the one are attributed to another." So in some way, the grace that is signified by the sign is present in the sign. The thing signified (grace) is attributed to the sign. Why do we need language like this? In my judgment, it seems there is some felt need or mystical superstition that something spiritual and unseen is happening when the sacrament is given or performed. Really? Do we have a single Old Testament verse that says something mystical was happening with circumcision? We just read that grace and salvation worked the same way in both testaments. Was grace somehow imparted or triggered at circumcision? Too bad for the Israelite girls and women. There's simply nothing like this in the text of either the Old or the New Testament. It's contrived and inserted into these narratives because of this odd, mystical view. The mystical connection does not derive from the text. We're never told that the members of Abraham's household who were circumcised believed anything at all, and yet in what follows, this household circumcision will be used to justify a mystical view of baptism. Let's move to point number 4 (IV) of this section of the Westminster Confession.

IV. There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospels, that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord: neither or which may be dispensed by any but a minister of the Word, lawfully ordained.

Now I wonder why it would matter who performs baptism. Is there a New Testament verse that says only elders or bishops should baptize or serve communion? This sounds very mediatorial to me—as though grace is being dispensed through a priestly figure. But let's keep going. On to chapter 28 (XXVIII): "Of Baptism."

I. 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: which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his Church until the end of the world.

In this section, we learn that baptism is a sign and seal of certain things to the recipient, and these things are: the covenant of grace, regeneration, remission of sins, and "giving up to God to walk in newness of life." Here's my question: where's the verse in the Bible that has circumcision being a sign of regeneration and remission of sins? Without that biblical evidence, what the Confession says is in error—at least if we want to be consistent in what we say about baptism (that we can also say it about circumcision). Circumcision was, of course, the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant, but not a so-called "covenant of grace," which is actually never mentioned in the Bible. So this equation fails here, as well. Let's move on to point number 4 (IV) in this section of the Confession.

IV. Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.

10:00

This language is very interesting, since it distinguishes those who profess faith from infants who receive baptism. I'd agree. Infants are not believing anything when they get baptized. We're all grateful that an infant is able to recognize where mommy's milk comes from, much less put the burden of understanding the Gospel on them. But the language of this point links infant baptism to election and so we're back to the problem of non-perseverance for many who are baptized, even of believing parents. If there is this link between the elect and the baptized, how does one account for baptized people who turn away from the faith? If listeners know their Calvinism or their Reformed theology, they'll see a conundrum now. Either the Reformed doctrine of infant baptism is incorrect or the doctrine of perseverance of the elect is incorrect. But now the Confession throws us a monkey wrench—or better, turns back on its own wording.

V. Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it, or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.

This is interesting. The Confession appears to notice the problem I've been focusing on and it denies that all who are baptized will be believers. But why, then, use the language about baptism that suggests such a link? Why say anything like that at all? Why not separate the two more clearly and say something to the effect that circumcision also failed to accomplish anything regarding salvation? In other words, why not be clear? Unfortunately, the Confession at this point doubles back on itself again by linking baptism to the dispensing of grace in the next section.

VI. The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, 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 [them], according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.

Now this is quite clear. Grace is conferred at baptism to the recipient. So where does this grace come from? Where do we see the Bible affirm this about circumcision? And how, with this grace dispensed and received, is a baptized person ever able to forsake the faith? One can't defend the Confession here by saying, "Well, it's not *saving* grace that is involved," since the point ends by confirming the recipient's election. That's what *is* involved. There's just simply no clarity here when you take all of these sections together. Hopefully what's clear by now is the need to be careful when comparing baptism and circumcision so that baptism does not impinge upon the biblical teaching about salvation by grace through a person's faith. It really isn't that difficult. The reason the creeds are so muddled in their thinking in this regard is a failure to take note of what can and cannot be said about circumcision, and then move from that to baptism. That will be our task in the next episode of the Naked Bible Podcast.