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CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF BAPTISM

HIS CRITICISM OF ROMAN CATHOLICS' AND PROTESTANT RADICALS' VIEWS OF BAPTISM

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I. Introduction

Karl Barth, in *The Teaching of the Church regarding Baptism*, criticized his great master John Calvin, saying, "One may read the 15th and 16th chapters in Book IV of the *Institutio* one after the other and convince oneself where the great Calvin was sure of his subject and where he obviously was not sure, but visibly nervous, in a hopelessly confused train of thought, abusing where he ought to inform and when he wants to convince, seeking a way in the fog, which can lead him to no goal, because he has none."¹ The subjects of the 15th and 16th chapters in Book IV of the *Institutes* are "Baptism" and "Infant Baptism Best Accords with Christ's Institution and the Nature of the Sign." According to Barth, while Calvin emphasized our confession before men in Baptism in the 15th chapter, he neglected this factor for the justification of infant baptism in the 16th chapter.² Even though Barth's criticism on

1) Translated by Ernest A. Payne (London: SCM Press, 1954), p. 49.

2) Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV. 4., p. 174.

Calvin is justified. Calvin had many reasons for the justification of infant baptism against Protestant radicals.

Calvin, on the one hand, criticized Roman Catholics' view of baptism severely, on the other hand, he could not accept the Anabaptists' view of baptism. Calvin tried to establish his own doctrine of baptism between Roman Catholics and Protestant radicals. This article deals with Calvin's doctrine of baptism in the middle way between Roman Catholics and Protestants radicals.

II. Calvin's Doctrine of Baptism

1. The Signification of Baptism

The chapter on baptism in the *Institutes* begins as follows:

Baptism is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children. Now baptism was given to us by God for these ends (which I have taught to be common to all sacraments): first, to serve our faith before him; secondly, to serve our confession before man.³⁾

Baptism is the sign of engrafting in Christ. At the same time it is the sign of initiating into the church, because the church is the body of Christ. First of all, baptism serves our faith before God. "Baptism," Calvin says, "brings three things to our faith."⁴⁾

3) Inst. IV. xv. 1.

4) Inst. IV. xv. 1.

Firstly, baptism is a token of our cleansing. "It is like a sealed document to confirm to us that all our sins are so abolished, remitted, and effaced that they can never come to his sight, be recalled, or charged against us."⁵

Secondly, baptism is a token of our mortification and renewal in Christ. "It shows us our mortification in Christ, and new life in him."⁶ Calvin says, "just as the twig draws substance and nourishment from the root to which it is grafted, so those who receive baptism with right faith truly feel the effective working of Christ's death in the mortification of their flesh, together with the working of his resurrection in the vivification of the Spirit."⁷

Lastly, baptism is a token of our union with Christ. Calvin says, "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. For he dedicated and sanctified baptism in his own body [Matt. 3:13] in order that he might have it in common with us as the firmest bond of the union and fellowship which he has deigned to form with us."⁸

Baptism serves not only our faith before God, but also our confession before men. "Indeed," Calvin says, "it is the mark by which we publicly profess that we wish to be reckoned God's people; by which we testify that we agree in worshipping the same God,

5) Inst. IV. xv. 1.

6) Inst. IV. xv. 5.

7) Inst. IV. xv. 5.

8) Inst. IV. xv. 6.

in one religion with all Christians; by which finally we openly affirm our faith.”⁹

However, baptism has no power in itself. “All the gifts of God proffered in baptism are found in Christ alone.”¹⁰ Calvin says, “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 cause of salvation, but only that in this sacrament are received the knowledge and certainty of such gifts.”¹¹ “Indeed,” he says, “baptism promises us no other purification than through the sprinkling of Christ’s blood, which is represented by means of water from the resemblance to cleansing and washing.”¹²

2. The Effect of Baptism

What, then, is the substantial benefits of baptism? Firstly, baptism confirms us that all our sins are abolished. Calvin says, “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.’”¹³ On the other hand, we are not to think that baptism was conferred upon us only for past time, so that for newly committed sins into which we fall after baptism we must seek new re-

9) Inst. IV. xv. 13.

10) Inst. IV. xv. 6.

11) Inst. IV. xv. 2.

12) Inst. IV. xv. 2.

13) Inst. IV. xv. 2.

medies of expiation in some other sacraments.¹⁴ But we must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life.¹⁵ "Therefore," Calvin says, "as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism, and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins."¹⁶ Once for all Christ shed his blood to wash our sins; daily the Holy Spirit makes us clean by the message of our cleansing; and he confirms us our cleansing by the memory of our baptism.¹⁷ Calvin says, "The sinner receives forgiveness by the ministry of the church, that is, not without the preaching of the gospel. But what is the nature of this preaching? That we have been cleansed of our sins by Christ's blood. Yet what is the sign and testimony of that washing but baptism?"¹⁸

Secondly, baptism prevents us from the dominion of sin over us. "Baptism indeed," Calvin says, "promises to us the drowning of our Pharaoh [Ex. 14:28] and the mortification of our sin, but not so that it no longer exists or gives us trouble, but only that it may not overcome us. For so long as we live cooped up in this prison of our body, traces of sin will dwell in us; but if we faithfully hold fast to the promise given us by God in baptism, they shall not dominate or rule."¹⁹ Calvin says to those who are disturbed and pricked by their own flesh. "Let them rather think that

14) Inst. IV. xv. 3.

15) Inst. IV. xv. 3.

16) Inst. IV. xv. 3.

17) Cf. Inst. IV. xvii. 5; Comm. Acts. 22 : 16.

18) Inst. IV. xv. 4.

19) Inst. IV. xv. 11.

they are still on the way, and believe that they have made good progress when they feel that a bit is being taken away from their lust each day, until they reach their destination, that is, the final death of their flesh, which shall be accomplished in the close of this mortal life. Meanwhile, let them not cease to struggle manfully, to have courage for the onward way, and to spur on to full victory. For the fact that, after long striving, they see no little difficulty still remaining ought to sharpen their efforts all the more."²⁰ He concludes, "This we must believe: we are baptized into the mortification of our flesh, which begins with our baptism and which we pursue day by day and which will, moreover, be accomplished when we pass from this life to the Lord."²¹ In short, "We are admonished through baptism to die to our desires by an example of Christ's death, and to be aroused to righteousness by the example of his resurrection."²²

3. Baptism and Faith

From baptism, we obtain only as much as we receive in faith. Calvin says, "from this sacrament, as from all others, we obtain only as much as we receive in faith. If we lack faith, this will be evidence of our ungratefulness, which renders us chargeable before God, because we have not believed the promise given there."²³ He says, commenting on Acts 10:47, "Peter reasoneth from the thing

20) Inst. IV. xv. 11.

21) Inst. IV. xv. 11.

22) Inst. IV. xv. 5.

23) Inst. IV. xv. 5.

to the sign; for, seeing that baptism is an addition of appurtenance of the spiritual grace, he which had received the Spirit is also apt [fit] to receive baptism; and this is the (most) lawful order, that the minister admit those unto the receiving of the outward sign whom God hath testified to be his childern by the mark and pledge of his Spirit; so that faith and doctrine are first."

Even though baptism becomes effective through faith, men's unworthiness does not lessen its effect. "Sacraments always retain their own character. Baptism is the water of rebirth, though the whole world disbelieve."²⁴ Also the effect of baptism does not depend upon the administrator. "Baptism is accordingly not of man but of God, no matter who administers it."²⁵ Calvin says, "We hold the ordinance of God to be too sacred to depend for its efficacy on man. Be it then that Judas, or any other epicurean contemner of everything sacred, is the administrator, the spiritual nourishment of the body and blood of Christ are conferred through His hand just as if he were an angel come down from heaven."²⁶ In short, Baptism "is a sacred and immutable testimony of the grace of God, though it were administered by the devil, though all who may partake of it were ungodly and polluted as to their own persons. Baptism ever retains its own character, and is never contaminated by the vices of men."²⁷

Therefore, even though "we were baptized by impious and ido-

24) Comm. Eze. 20 : 20. LCC XXIII. 233.

25) Inst. IV. xv 16.

26) CR 9:26. Quoted by Wallace. *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1953). p. 174.

27) Comm. Amo. 5 : 25-26.

latrous men."²⁸ even though we were baptized in our ignorance, we have not to be baptized again. "We indeed, being blind and unbelieving, for a long time did not grasp the promise that had been given us in baptism; yet that promise, since it was of God, ever remained fixed and firm and trustworthy."²⁹ "Even if all men are liars and faithless, still God does not cease to be trustworthy."³⁰ "We therefore," Calvin says, "confess that for that time baptism benefitted us not at all, inasmuch as the promise offered us in it—without which baptism is nothing—lay neglected. Now when, by God's grace, we begin to repent, we accuse our blindness and hardness of heart—we who were for so long ungrateful toward his great goodness. But we believe that the promise itself did not vanish. Rather, we consider that God through baptism promises us forgiveness of sins, and he will doubtless fulfill his promise for all believers. This promise was offered to us in baptism; therefore, let us embrace it by faith. Indeed, on account of our unfaithfulness it lay long buried from us; now, therefore, let us receive it through faith."³¹

4. Circumcision and Baptism

According to Calvin, circumcision and baptism are in an anagogic relationship.³² Firstly, the promise is the same in both.³³ Be-

28) Inst. IV. xv. 16.

29) Inst. IV. xv. 17.

30) Inst. IV. xv. 17.

31) Inst. IV. xv. 17.

32) Inst. IV. xv. 3.

33) Inst. IV. xvi. 4.

cause, as baptism promises the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, so circumcision promises them.³⁴ Secondly, the thing represented is the same, namely, regeneration.³⁵ Thirdly, in both there is one foundation upon which the fulfilment of these things rests, that is, Christ.³⁶ "Therefore," Calvin says, "there is no difference in the inner mystery, by which the whole force and character of the sacraments are to be weighed. What dissimilarity remains lies in the outward ceremony, which is very slight factor, since the most weighty part depends upon the promise and the thing signified."³⁷ "We therefore conclude that apart from the difference in the visible ceremony, whatever belongs to circumcision pertains likewise to baptism."³⁸

If whatever belongs to circumcision pertains likewise a baptism, the children of Christians must be baptized as the children of Abraham were circumcised. Calvin says, "we see that it pleased him especially to embrace Abraham's offspring by his mercy, and, in order to attest that mercy more clearly, to seal it by circumci-

34) Cf. Inst. IV. xvi. 3. "The promise of eternal life is contained in these words as Christ interprets them, drawing an argument from them for the immortality and resurrection of believers. For Christ says, 'He is not the God of the dead but of the living' [Luke 20 : 38 : Matt. 22 : 32]."

35) Cf. Inst. IV. xvi. 3. "Moses more clearly explains elsewhere, when exhorting the Israelite people to circumcise the foreskin of their heart for the Lord [Deut. 10 : 16], that circumcision is the sign of mortification."

36) Cf. Inst. IV. xvi. 3. "Moreover, as we have taught that Christ is the foundation of baptism, in whom both of these reside, so it is also evident that he is the foundation of circumcision. For he is promised to Abraham, and in him the blessing of all nations [Gen. 12 : 2-3]."

37) Inst. IV. xvi. 4.

38) Inst. IV. xvi. 4.

sion. Now the condition of the Christian church is exactly the same. For, as Paul argues in that passage that the Jews are sanctified by their parents, so he teaches elsewhere that the children of Christians receive the same sanctification from their parents [I Cor. 7:14]."³⁹ God "expressly declares that the circumcision of a tiny infant will be in lieu of a seal to certify the promise of the covenant. But if the covenant still remains firm and steadfast, it applies no less today to the children of Christians than under the Old Testament it pertained to the infants of the Jews."⁴⁰ Calvin argues, "if they are participants in the thing signified, why shall they be debarred from the sign?... since the word 'baptism' is applied to infants, why shall the sign, which is an appendix of the word, be denied to them?"⁴¹ Moreover, "after Christ's resurrection, the boundaries of God's Kingdom began to extend far and wide among all nations generally, in order that according to Christ's saying, believers might be gathered together from everywhere to sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in heavenly glory [Matt. 8:11]."⁴² In short, circumcision was for the Jews and their children. Now baptism is for all people and their children, including the Jews and their children. What was circumcision for the Jews was replaced for us (including the Jews) by baptism. Calvin argues, "if the testimony by which the Jews were assured of the salvation of their posterity is taken away from us, Christ's coming would have the effect of making God's grace more obscure and

39) Inst. IV. xvi. 15.

40) Inst. IV. xvi. 5.

41) Inst. IV. xvi. 5.

42) Inst. IV. xvi. 13.

less attested for us than it had previously been for the Jews. Now, this cannot be said without grievously slandering Christ..."⁴³ Also he argues, "Indeed, it is most evident that the covenant which the Lord once made with Abraham [cf. Gen. 17:14] is no less in force today for Christians than it was of old for the Jewish people... Unless perhaps we think that Christ by his coming lessened or curtailed the grace of the Father—but this is nothing but execrable blasphemy!"⁴⁴ "Accordingly, the children of the Jews also, because they had been made heirs of his covenant and distinguished from the children of the impious, were called a holy seed [Ezra 9:2; Isa. 6:13]. For this same reason, the children of Christians are considered holy; and even though born with only one believing parent, by the apostle's testimony they differ from the unclean seed of idolators [I Cor. 7:14]."⁴⁵

Calvin says, commenting on Acts 10:47, "I grant that those who are strangers from the church must be taught before the sign of adoption be given them: but I say, that the children of the faithful which are born in the church are from their mother's womb of the household of the kingdom of God." "Even those who are born the children of Abraham according to the flesh, are also counted the spiritual children of God, unless they grow out of kind through unbelief. For the boughs be naturally holy, because they spring from a holy root, until they become profane through their own fault."⁴⁶ "Yet," Calvin says, "it followeth not thereupon (...) that

43) Inst. IV. xvi. 6.

44) Inst. IV. xvi. 6.

45) Inst. IV. xvi. 6.

46) Comm. Acts. 13 : 33.

the grace of God is tied to the carnal seed; because, though the promise of life came by inheritance to the posterity of Abraham, yet many were deprived by their unbelief. Therefore faith is the cause, that of a great multitude only a few are counted children. And that is the double election whereof I spake before. The one common to the whole nation alike; because the first adoption of God containeth the whole family of Abraham. The other, which is restrained unto the secret counsel of God, and is an length established by faith, that it may be confirmed to men."⁴⁷ Also Calvin says, commenting on Acts 3:25, Peter "affirmeth that this is of force under the kingdom of Christ, that God doth adopt the children together with the fathers; and so, consequently, the grace of salvation may be extended unto those which are as yet unborn. (Rom. ix. 7.) I grant, indeed, that many which are the children of the faithful, according to the flesh, are counted bastards, and not legitimate, because they thrust themselves out of the holy progeny through their unbelief. But this doth no whit hinder the Lord from calling and admitting the seed of the godly into fellowship of grace. And so, although the common election⁴⁸ be not effectual in all, yet may it set open a gate for the speical elect."

47) Comm. Acts. 13 : 33.

48) It seems to us that Egil Grisli correctly says, "Although the discussion of the children of the faithful is carried on in terms of natural descendants, in Calvin's mind the real point of significance is not nature but election" ["Calvin's Doctrine of Baptism." *Church History*. 31(1962). p. 52].

III. Calvin's Criticism of Roman Catholics' View of Baptism

1. Theatrical Pomp

According to Calvin, the Roman Catholic ceremony of baptism is harmful as well as useless. "From baptism similarly we have cut away many additions which were partly useless, and partly, from their superstitious tendency, harmful."⁴⁹ "As though to be baptized with water according to Christ's precept were a contemptible thing, a benediction, or rather incantation, was devised to defile the true consecration of water. Afterward, a candle was added, with the chrism. But exsufflation seemed to open the gate to baptism."⁵⁰ According to Calvin, "in the schools as well as in sermons, they so extolled the efficacy of signs, that, instead of directing men to Christ, they taught them to confide in the visible elements."⁵¹ Also Calvin criticizes them, "nothing is more alien to the nature of a sacrament than to set before the people an empty spectacle, unaccompanied with explanation of the mystery."⁵² The exhibition of the sign, separated from an understanding of the mystery, "is a sacrilegious divorce, which reverses the order instituted by Christ."⁵³ Therefore, Calvin says: "How much better it

49) *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, LCC XXII, 203.

50) *Inst.* IV, xv, 19.

51) *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, LCC XXII, 203.

52) *Ibid.*

53) *Ibid.*

would be to omit from baptism all theatrical pomp, which dazzles the eye of the simple and deadens their minds; whenever anyone is to be baptized, to present him to the assembly of believers and, with the whole church looking on as witness and praying over him, offer him to God; to recite the confession of faith with which the catechumen should be instructed; to recount the promises to be had in baptism; to baptize the catechumen in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit [Matt. 28:19]; lastly, to dismiss him with prayers and thanksgiving. If this were done, nothing essential would be omitted; and that one ceremony, which came from God, its author, not buried in outlandish pollutions, would shine in its full brightness."⁵⁴

2. Weakening of Baptism

According to Calvin, at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life. Against confirmation, Calvin says, "These anointers say that the Holy Spirit is given in baptism for innocence; in confirmation, for the increase of grace; that in baptism we are regenerated unto life; in confirmation we are equipped for battle. And they are so shameless as to deny that baptism can be duly completed without confirmation! What wickedness!"⁵⁵ "Who now can doubt that this is a doctrine of Satan, which, cutting off from baptism the promises proper to baptism, conveys and transfers them elsewhere?"⁵⁶

54) Inst. IV. xv. 19.

55) Inst. IV. xix. 8.

56) Inst. IV. xix. 8.

"Therefore," Calvin says, "I can more truly define this confirmation than they have hitherto defined it: it is an overt outrage against baptism, which obscures, indeed, abolishes, its function."⁵⁷ Moreover, "they determine that this sacred anointing ought to be held in higher veneration than baptism, because it is exclusively administered by the hands of the prelates, while baptism is commonly dispensed by all priests."⁵⁸ Calvin asks, "What can you say here but that they are plainly mad who are so fond of their own inventions that by comparison they carelessly despise God's most holy institutions?"⁵⁹

Against penance, Calvin says, "this error has provided us with the fictitious sacrament of penance... But no wonder if men, who from the grossness of their natures were immoderately attached to outward things, also betrayed this fault, in the fact that, not content with the pure instruction of God, they introduced new helps devised by themselves!" As if baptism itself were not the sacrament of penance!"⁶⁰ "Therefore," he says, "there is no doubt that all pious folk throughout life, whenever they are troubled by a consciousness of their faults, may venture to remind themselves of their baptism, that from it they may be confirmed in assurance of that sole and perpetual cleansing which we have in Christ's blood."⁶¹ Therefore, "we are not to think that baptism was conferred upon us only for past time, so that for newly committed sins into which we fall after baptism we must seek new remedies of expiation in some other sacraments, as if the force of the former one were spent."⁶²

57) Inst. IV. xix. 8.

58) Inst. IV. xix. 10.

59) Inst. IV. xix. 10.

60) Inst. IV. xv. 4.

61) Inst. IV. xv. 4.

62) Inst. IV. xv. 3.

3. Sacramental Mechanism

Calvin says, commenting on I Pet. 3:21. "We must at the same time beware of another evil, such as prevails among the Papists : for as they distinguish not as they ought between the thing and the sign, they stop at the outward element, and on that fix their hope of salvation." Therefore the sight of the water takes away their thoughts from the blood of Christ and the power of the Spirit. "They do not regard Christ as the only author of all blessings therein offered to us : they transfer the glory of his death to the water, they tie the secret power of the Spirit to visible sign."⁶³ Also he says, commenting on Acts 10:47. "so it doth strongly refute the error of the Papists, who tie the grace of the Spirit to the signs, and think that the same is fet [fetched] from heaven with enchantments, as those witches did think that they did pull down the moon with their charms." "But," he continues to say, "forasmuch as Luke saith that these had the Holy Ghost given them who were not as yet baptized, he showeth that the Spirit is not included in baptism."⁶⁴ The surest argument to refute those who attribute everything to the power of the water "can be sought in the meaning of baptism itself, which draws us away, not only from the visible element which meets our eyes, but from all other means, that it may fasten our minds upon Christ alone."⁶⁵

63) Comm. I Pet. 3 : 21.

64) Comm. Acts. 10 : 47.

65) Inst. IV. xv. 2.

IV. Calvin's Criticism of Protestant Radicals' View of Baptism

1. Rebaptism

According to Calvin, the "catabaptists" "passionately urge rebaptism." because they "deny that we have been duly baptized because we were baptized by impious and idolatrous men under the papal government."⁶⁶ "We," Calvin says, "shall be armed against their follies with a strong enough argument if we think of ourselves as initiated by baptism not into the name of any man, but into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit [Matt. 28 : 19]."⁶⁷

Baptism is accordingly not of man but of God, no matter who administers it. ⁶⁸ "Ignorant or even contemptuous as those who baptized us were of God and all piety, they did not baptize us into the fellowship of either their ignorance or sacrilege, but into faith in Jesus Christ, because it was not their own name but God's that they invoked, and they baptized us into no other name."⁶⁹

Secondly, they object that baptism ought to be celebrated in the assemblies of the godly, and therefore, baptism under the papal government is void. However, Calvin says, "Their objection... does

66) Inst. IV. xv. 16.

67) Inst. IV. xv. 16.

68) Inst. IV. xv. 16.

69) Inst. IV. xv. 16.

not have the effect of extinguishing the whole force of what is only partially faulty. For when we teach what ought to be done in order that baptism may be pure and free of all defilement, we do not abolish God's ordinance, however idolaters may corrupt it."⁷⁰ He gives an example of Jewish circumcision in order to strengthen his argument. "When in ancient times circumcision was corrupted by many superstitions, it did not cease nevertheless to be regarded as a symbol of grace. And when Josiah and Hezekiah called out of all Israel those who had forsaken God [II Kings, chs. 22; 23; 18], they did not summon them to a second circumcision."⁷¹

Thirdly, they ask "what faith came to us during some years after our baptism. This they do to prove our baptism void, since it is not sanctified to us except when the word of promise is accepted in faith."⁷² Calvin says, "To this question we reply that we indeed, being blind and unbelieving, for a long time did not grasp the promise that had been given us in baptism; yet that promise, since it was of God, ever remained fixed and firm and trustworthy."⁷³ Again he gives an example of Jewish circumcision. "For this reason, when the Lord invites the Jewish people to repentance, he enjoins no second circumcision upon those who(...) were circumcised by an impious and sacrilegious hand and lived for a time entangled in the same impiety; but he urges only conversion of heart. However the covenant might be violated by them,

70) Inst. IV. xv. 16.

71) Inst. IV. xv. 16.

72) Inst. IV. xv. 17.

73) Inst. IV. xv. 17.

the symbol of the covenant remained ever firm and inviolable by virtue of the Lord's institution."⁷⁴

Fourthly, they assert that Paul rebaptized those who had once been baptized with John's baptism. "Then, as those persons who had previously been wrongly instructed, after they were taught the right faith, were rebaptized into it, that baptism which was without true doctrine must be counted as nothing, and we ought to be baptized all over again into the true religion which we have now tasted for the first time."⁷⁵ However, according to Calvin, "John's ministry was exactly the same as that afterward committed to the apostles."⁷⁶ He continues to say, "John and the apostles agreed on one doctrine: both baptized to repentance, both to forgiveness of sins, both into the name of Christ, from whom repentance and forgiveness of sins came. John said that Christ was the Lamb of God, through whom the sins of the world would be taken away [John 1 : 29]. In this, he made Him a sacrifice acceptable to the Father, and the propitiator of righteousness and author of salvation. What could the apostles add to this confession?"⁷⁷ "The different hands that administer baptism do not make it different; but the same doctrine shows it to be the same baptism."⁷⁸ Therefore, Calvin says, commenting on Acts 19 : 2-7, "I admit, for my part, that it was the true baptism of John, and one and the same

74) Inst. IV. xv. 17.

75) Inst. IV. xv. 18.

76) Inst. IV. xv. 7.

77) Inst. IV. xv. 7.

78) Inst. IV. xv. 7.

as the baptism of Christ, but I deny that they were rebaptized.”⁷⁹
 “What, then, do the words, ‘They were baptized in the name of Jesus,’ mean?” Calvin answers his own question. “I prefer to understand it more simply, that it is the baptism of the Holy Spirit, that is, the visible graces of the Spirit given through the laying on of hands. It is nothing new to signify these graces by the word ‘baptism’. As on the Day of Pentecost, the apostles are said to have recalled the words of the Lord about the baptism of fire and of the Spirit [Acts 1:5]...”⁸⁰ Also he says, “this is not out of accord with what is afterward added: ‘when he had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit descended upon them’ [Acts 19: 6 p]. For Luke is not telling two different things, but he is following the form of narration familiar to the Hebrews, who first put forward a summary of the matter and then explain it more fully.”⁸¹ Anyone can observe this from the context itself.”⁸²

2. Rejection of Infant Baptism

The chapter on infant baptism in the *Institutes* begins as follows:

But since in this age certain frantic spirits have grievously

79) Inst. IV. xv. 18.

80) Inst. IV. xv. 18.

81) This interpretation may be ‘adventurous’, as F. Wendel says (*Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet, The Fontana Library; Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd, 1980, p. 323). Nevertheless, it does not seem that the disciples of Jesus who had once been the disciples of John the Baptist were rebaptized by Jesus or someone else.

82) Inst. IV. xv. 18.

disturbed the church over infant baptism, and do not cease their agitation, I cannot refrain from adding an appendix here to restrain their mad ravings ... If it appears to have been contrived by the mere rashness of men, let us bid it farewell and measure the true observance of baptism by God's will alone. But if it be proved by no means lacking his sure authority, we must beware lest, in abolishing God's holy ordinances, we also become insolent toward their Author himself.⁸³

Henceforth, Calvin deals with the relationship between circumcision and baptism. As we mentioned above, Calvin concludes, "It is most evident that the covenant which the Lord once made with Abraham [cf. Gen. 17 : 14] is no less in force today for Christians than it was of old for the Jewish people."⁸⁴ He continues to say, "Now seeing that the Lord, immediately after making the covenant with Abraham, commanded it to be sealed in infants by an outward sacrament [Gen. 17 : 12], what excuse will Christians give for not testifying and sealing it in their children today?"⁸⁵ After that, Calvin deals with the relationship between Jesus and the children. He asks, "If it is right for infants to be brought to Christ, why not also to be received into baptism, the symbol of our communion and fellowship with Christ? If the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them, why is the sign denied which, so to speak, opens to them a door into the church, that, adopted into it, they may be enrolled

83) Inst. IV. xvi. 7.

84) *Supra*, p. 125

85) Inst. IV. xvi. 6.

among the heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven?"⁸⁶⁾

After he establishes thus the basis for his argument, he deals with the Anabaptist arguments. First of all, Calvin refutes the Anabaptist argument that baptism is not to be associated with circumcision. "They say that these two signify different things, that the covenant in each is quite different, and the calling of children under each not the same. But when they set out to prove this first point, they pretend that circumcision was a figure of mortification, not of baptism."⁸⁷⁾ Calvin says, "This we most willingly concede to them, for it supports us very well. The only proof of our opinion we are using is that baptism and circumcision are signs of mortification. From this we gather that baptism is put in place of circumcision in order to represent to us what circumcision signified to the Jews of old."⁸⁸⁾ Secondly, in asserting a difference between the covenants, they think that a covenant with the Jews does not go beyond the temporal life, and that the promises given them rest in present and physical benefits. However, Calvin says, "if circumcision was a literal sign, we must estimate baptism to be the same. For the apostle, in the second chapter of Colossians, makes neither more spiritual than the other. For he says that we were circumcised in Christ not by a circumcision made with hands, when we laid aside the body of sin which dwelt in our flesh. This he calls the 'circumcision of Christ' [Col. 2:11]. Afterward, to explain this statement, he adds that in baptism we were 'buried with Christ' [Col. 2:12]."⁸⁹⁾ He asks, "What do these words

86) Inst. IV. xvi. 7.

87) Inst. IV. xvi. 10.

88) Inst. IV. xvi. 10.

89) Inst. IV. xvi. 11.

mean, except that the fulfillment and truth of baptism are also the truth and fulfillment of circumcision, since they signify one and the same thing?"⁹⁰ Thirdly, according to Calvin, Anabaptists, in the use of the term "children", find this difference: those who had their origin from his seed were called the children of Abraham under the Old Testament; now, those who imitate his faith are called by this name.⁹¹ "They therefore say that that physical infancy which was engrafted into the fellowship of the covenant through circumcision foreshadowed the spiritual infants of the New Testament, who were regenerated to immortal life by God's Word."⁹² Calvin admits that there is a feeble spark of truth "in those words."⁹³ But, he says, "if, as they plainly indicate, they mean that God's spiritual blessing was never promised to Abraham's physical offspring, they are gravely mistaken in this."⁹⁴ For the Lord promises Abraham that he will be blessed [Gen. 12:3], and at the same time assures him that He will be his God and the God of his descendants [Gen. 17 : 7].⁹⁵

Secondly, Calvin deals with the Anabaptist argument that infants are incapable of faith. According to Calvin, they claim that children are to be barred from baptism, for children because of their age are not yet able to understand the mystery signified in it, namely, spiritual regeneration, which cannot take place in earliest infancy.⁹⁶ "Our opponents

90) Inst. IV. xvi. 11.

91) Inst. IV. xvi. 12.

92) Inst. IV. xvi. 12.

93) Inst. IV. xvi. 12.

94) Inst. IV. xvi. 12.

95) Inst. IV. xvi. 12.

96) Inst. IV. xvi. 17.

therefore," Calvin says, "conclude that children are to be considered solely as children of Adam until they reach an appropriate age for the second rebirth."⁹⁷ He refutes their argument, "if it is admitted that they are among the children of Adam, they are left in death, since in Adam we can but die [Rom. 5 : 12 ff.]. On the contrary, Christ commands that they be brought to him [Matt. 19 : 14]. Why is this? Because he is life. Therefore, to quicken them he makes them partakers in himself, while these fellows sentence them to banishment and death."⁹⁸ But they ask "how are infants, unendowed with knowledge of good or evil, regenerated." Calvin says, "We reply that God's work, though beyond our understanding, is still not annulled. Now it is perfectly clear that those infants who are to be saved(as some are surely saved from that early age) are previously regenerated by the Lord."⁹⁹ He gives an

97) Inst. IV. xvi. 17.

98) Inst. IV. xvi. 17.

99) Inst. IV. xvi. 17. Calvin's concept of regeneration is very different from the Protestant radicals' concept of rebirth. Calvin relates regeneration with election. On the contrary, for Protestant radicals, rebirth means new birth, that is, becoming new man. Hubmaier says, "That is the real rebirth of which Christ speaks in John, ch. 3, whereby our Adam, who through the Fall had become a woman and an Eve, becomes a man again; and the soul, which had become flesh, becomes again spirit" (*On Free Will*, LCC XXV, 118). Hofmann says, "... where the righteous [re-] birth takes place... There the old Adam is put off completely" (*The Ordinance of God*, LCC XXV, 191). Dietrich Philips says, "Therefore the church of God is a *congregation* of holy beings, namely, of the angels in heaven and of the believing reborn men on earth, who have been renewed in the image of God" (*The Church of God*, LCC XXV, 229). On the contrary, Calvin says, "They (infants) also lay hold on righteousness, but such righteousness on the people of God can obtain in this life, that is, by imputation only ..." (inst. IV. xv. 10). In short, for

example of John the Baptist in order to strengthen his argument. "God provided a proof in John the Baptist, whom he sanctified in his mother's womb [Luk 1 : 15] — something he could do in others."¹⁰⁰ Again, "they counter with the objection that the Spirit in Scripture recognizes no regeneration except from incorruptible seed, that is, from God's word [I Peter 1:23]."¹⁰¹ Calvin says, "In this they wrongly interpret Peter's statement, which has reference only to believers who had been taught by the preaching of the gospel. We indeed admit that to such persons the Word of the Lord is the only seed of spiritual regeneration : but we deny the inference from this that infants cannot be regenerated by God's power, which is as easy and ready to him as it is incomprehensible and wonderful to us."¹⁰² Also he says, "He has certainly used such another way in calling many : giving them true knowledge of himself by inward means, that is, by the illumination of the Spirit apart from the medium of preaching."¹⁰³ "If it please him," Calvin asks, "why may the Lord not shine with a tiny spark at the present time on those whom he will illumine in the future with the full splendor of his light—especially if he has not removed their ignorance before taking them from the prison of the flesh?"¹⁰⁴ However, he says, "I would not rashly affirm that they are endowed with the same faith as we experience in ourselves, or have

Calvin, regeneration is justification, but for Protestant radicals, regeneration is real sanctification

100) Inst. IV. xvi. 17.

101) Inst. IV. xvi. 18.

102) Inst. IV. xvi. 18.

103) Inst. IV. xvi. 19.

104) Inst. IV. xvi. 19.

entirely the same knowledge of faith—this I prefer to leave undetermined—but I would somewhat restrain the obtuse arrogance of those who at the top of their lungs confidently deny or assert whatever they please.”¹⁰⁵ “But,” Calvin says, “to insist still more stoutly upon this point, they add that baptism is a sacrament of repentance and of faith. Accordingly, since neither of these can come about in tender infancy, we must guard against admitting infants into the fellowship of baptism, lest its meaning be made empty and fleeting.”¹⁰⁶ In fact, Calvin avoids a direct answer, and draws an argument from the similarity between circumcision and baptism.¹⁰⁷ He says, “it is very clear from many testimonies of Scripture that circumcision was also a sign of repentance [Jer. 4 : 4 ; 9 : 25 ; cf. Deut. 10 : 16 : 30 : 6]. Then Paul calls it the seal of the righteousness of faith [Rom. 4 : 11]. Therefore, let a reason be required of God himself why he commended it to be impressed on the bodies of infants. For since baptism and circumcision are in the same case, our opponents cannot give anything to one without conceding it to the other.”¹⁰⁸ He continues to say, “We therefore say that, since God communicated circumcision to infants as a sacrament of repentance and of faith, it does not seem absurd if they are now made participants in baptism.”¹⁰⁹ “Although,” he says, “infants, at the very moment they were circumcised, did not comprehend with their understanding what that meant, they were truly circumcised to the mortification of their corrupt

105) Inst. IV. xvi. 19.

106) Inst. IV. xvi. 20.

107) Inst. IV. xvi. 20.

108) Inst. IV. xvi. 20.

109) Inst. IV. xvi. 20.

and defiled nature, a mortification that they would afterward practice in mature years. To sum up, this objection can be solved without difficulty: infants are baptized into future repentance and faith, and even though these have not yet been formed in them, the seed of both lies hidden within them by the secret working of the Spirit."¹¹⁰

V. Conclusion

As we mentioned above, Calvin's doctrine of baptism is in the middle way between Roman Catholics and Protestant radicals. According to Calvin, Roman Catholics do not regard Christ as the only author of all blessings offered to us in baptism, and so they transfer the glory of his death to the water. Also Calvin criticized Roman Catholics, because they tied the secret power of the Spirit to visible sign. According to Calvin, we must distinguish the secret power of the Spirit and visible sign in baptism. On the other hand, according to Calvin, Protestant radicals do not regard God as the author of baptism. If we are baptized not into the name of any man, but into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, the baptism is not of man but of God, no matter who administers it. Protestant radicals separated promise of baptism from water of baptism. According to Calvin, even though a man does not grasp the promise that has been given him in baptism, yet that promise, since it is of God, ever remains fixed and firm and trustworthy. Against Roman Catholics, Calvin says, 'distinguish between power of the Spirit and the visible sign.' Against Protestant radicals, he says, 'do

110) Inst. IV. xvi. 20.

not disjoin the promise of God from the visible sign.' According to Calvin, we ought to distinguish between the sign and the thing signified, yet we must not disjoin the reality from the sign. It seems that this relation can be diagrammed in two concentric circles. On the other hand, Roman Catholics' view can be diagrammed in one coterminous circle and Protestant radicals' view can be diagrammed in two disjointed circles.

