

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Rev. Walter Harinck

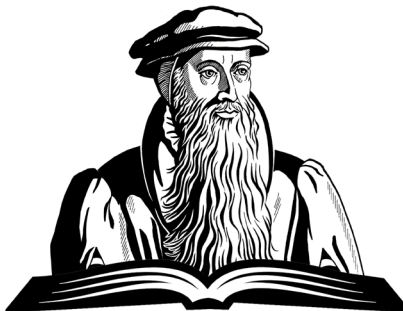
Module 6:

ECCLESIOLOGY—

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

Lecture 9

**THE SACRAMENT OF
CHRISTIAN BAPTISM**



The John Knox Institute
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Module 6 ~ Lecture 9

The Sacrament of Christian Baptism

Dear friends, do you remember why we study ecclesiology? Because of God, and because of the church—it is God’s church! The study of the church is about our relationship to Jesus, and it is about our salvation. The church is the body of Christ, ordained by Christ, purchased by his precious blood, called from death unto life through the Spirit of Christ. He preserves his people and leads them into everlasting life through the Holy Spirit. As we saw in the previous lecture, God uses the means of grace to bring sinners to repentance, and to unite them with Christ and all his benefits. Therefore, God gave his church his holy Word and the use of the holy Sacraments. In this lecture, we want to study the Sacrament of Christian Baptism.

Christ himself instituted the Sacrament of Baptism. We read about this institution in Matthew 28, verses 19 and 20: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.” These words evidence the holy Trinity, for Jesus does not say, “baptize in the names,” but “in the name”—singular. There is holy unity between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. True Baptism has to take place according to this baptismal formula. When it is said that the apostles baptized in the name of Jesus, it is a sign that points to the doctrine of Jesus, and this doctrine of Christ includes Baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. So, when the apostles baptized in the name of Christ, it does not mean that they did not baptize in the name of the Triune God. From early sources, we also know that the Christian church used the same formula as the one we use today.

In Baptism, the Triune God solemnly seals his covenant and his promises. He swears with an oath, “Jehovah’s truth will stand forever, his covenant bonds he will not sever.” John Calvin explains beautifully why the name of the Triune God must be used: “There are good reasons why the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are expressly mentioned, for there is no other way in which the efficacy of Baptism can be experienced than when we begin with the unmerited mercy of the Father, who reconciles us to himself by the only begotten Son; next, Christ comes forward with the sacrifice of his death; and at length, the Holy Spirit is likewise added, by whom he washes and regenerates us, and, in short, makes us partakers of his benefits.”

The three persons of the Trinity show their saving work in Baptism, and each of them seals that they will work that which is necessary for salvation. There’s no salvation without the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit—the Trinity—one God in three persons. When we call upon their name—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—we’re depending upon them, all of them. And we’re honor-

ing them. And we're saying that this act of Baptism is by them and for them.

In the Greek language, "in the name" is a very strong expression. It does not only mean commanded by God, but in communion with the name of the Triune God. It has the sense of "into". It designates a transfer into communion with God. Thus, "in the name" says what God wants for his church—he wants to bring them into communion with himself, and to be a God of full salvation to them. Do you see the depth and the riches of the baptismal formula? It speaks about the necessity and the possibility of being transferred into communion with God, in the way of a new birth, through the Holy Spirit, and the blood of Christ.

The administration of Baptism in the name of the Triune God is also a divine seal of his covenant and promise. It is just like someone who writes his name at the bottom of an important document, as a sign that he guarantees its content. The Triune God puts his name under his Word and promise, guaranteeing that everything he spoke in his Word is true. So the sacrament is a seal of God's promises. The eternal covenant stands unmovable. True believers are comforted that they have an eternal covenant of grace with God, and may say in faith, "Yet, he hath made with me an everlasting covenant"—2 Samuel 23, verse 5.

Baptism is also a blessing to the visible church. In the administration of Baptism, God promises to establish his covenant with the visible church and her seed, and to gather his elect church from within her. He confirms all this by underwriting it with his triune name. Here is a great comfort for us and our children. God swears that his promises in the gospel are certain and true, that Jesus Christ has come into the world to save sinners. The Lord wants us to answer to his promises by praying, "Lord, do as thou hast said"—2 Samuel 7, verse 25.

In conclusion, we see three major points in the institution of Baptism. The first one, Baptism is Christ's ordinance for the church throughout time to show the relationship that the Triune God established with the church through the Lord Jesus Christ. In second place, the Triune God and Jesus Christ can never be separated or opposed to each other. Third place, recognizing the Trinitarian message of Baptism is a call to have Trinitarian ministries, and to teach those who are baptized who this Triune God is, and what he speaks and does.

The oldest mode of Baptism is by immersion. This is the most significant mode of administering Baptism. But that does not mean that the mode of sprinkling is less significant. The sign of Baptism is the water. And the meaning of the water is the idea of purification. As water washes the dirt of the body, so the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ cleanseth us of all our sins—1 John 1, verse 7. Jesus did not prescribe a certain mode of Baptism, and the Bible never stresses any particular mode. The word that Jesus used for Baptism does not only mean "to immerse", but it may also mean "to purify by washing". It's possible and even probable that some of the cases of Baptism mentioned in the Bible were cases of Baptism by immersion. But from the earliest times, it was also customary to baptize by sprinkling and pouring. It is not likely that the multitudes of three thousand converts on the day of Pentecost were baptized by immersion. From early church history, we also know that Baptism by immersion and Baptism by sprinkling were both practiced. Even in the days of the Old Testament, sprinkling was used for ceremonial washings. And the prophet Ezekiel speaks of spiritual renewal by sprinkling. In our Reformed point of view, we believe that there is no Biblical demand for Baptism by immersion only. Baptism by sprinkling is a biblical and lawful mode of Baptism.

Now we want to focus on some examples of Baptism from the New Testament. Let's look at the book of Acts. What lessons do we learn from there? On the day of Pentecost, thousands came to repentance and were baptized. And those who were baptized were "added to the church"—Acts

2, verse 47. And being added to the church also means no longer belonging to “this untoward generation”—Acts 2, verse 40. Here we see that Baptism is a mark of membership of the church.

In Acts 2, we also see that Baptism did not take place on the basis of the repentance or the faith of the people. They were baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins”—Acts 2, verse 38. Baptism is based on the revelation of Jesus Christ, as displayed in his finished work, and Baptism is not on the basis of anything in the person being baptized. Baptism signifies the remission of sins, and seals the promise of forgiveness, and therefore, Baptism calls for faith and repentance as the way in which to receive forgiveness.

Baptism is related to the gift of the Holy Spirit. The coming of Christ’s kingdom on Pentecost is a confirmation of John’s message that Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit. In Acts, chapter 8, we find the well-known story of Philip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch. Baptism was administered unto the eunuch after he confessed that he believed Jesus Christ to be the Son of God. Philip did not judge the heart, but accepted his word and baptized him. This confirms once again that Baptism is not a sign of the baptized person’s faith, but a confirmation of the preaching of the gospel. The eunuch’s Baptism confirmed the truth of God’s Word preached unto him by Philip.

In the book of Acts, we also read of the Baptism of households. Cornelius, the centurion, was baptized, with his household and those who were with him—Acts, chapter 10. Lydia’s heart was opened when she heard Paul speaking, and she and her household were baptized—Acts 16, verses 14–15. The Philippian jailor believed and was baptized, he and all his household. Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue in Corinth, believed on the Lord with all his house, and many of the Corinthians believed, and all were baptized.

Acts 18, verse 8. Keep in mind that the New Testament shows that believers and their household are baptized. In the Old Testament, God instructed Abraham to circumcise all males who were in his tent. Here we see again the unity between the Old and the New Testament. In the Old Testament, all males who belonged to Abraham’s tent had to be circumcised, and in the New Testament, all who belonged to the household of a believer had to be baptized. We will come to this later when we think of Baptism and God’s covenant.

Furthermore, the New Testament teaches us that Baptism evidences salvation in Christ alone. Romans 6, verses 3 and 4 says: “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by Baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” Also Galatians 3, verses 26–29 declares: “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

In Galatians, Paul opposes legalism that would return to the law as a condition for receiving salvation. His central argument is that “a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ.” The work of Christ on the cross satisfies God’s justice, removes the curse of God’s wrath, and opens the way of salvation.

Paul says that Baptism is “into Christ” and is about “putting on Christ.” Baptism is not just another way to gain God’s favour from man’s side, but directs us to Christ and his finished work. In fact, the New Testament believer receives salvation in the same way as Abraham—by faith. For we are saved not by works but by faith. When by faith a person understands the message of Baptism and embraces this Christ, all legalism is crushed, and all that is left is the adoration of God’s

grace in Christ.

The New Testament also teaches us the connection of Baptism with the unity of the church. When by faith a person embraces the message of Baptism, all differences with others who are also saved by Christ fall away. We all have to confess that we are conceived and born in sin, and therefore, are children of wrath. Only by free and sovereign grace are we saved, not by works, but by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We all stand in need of the work of the same Spirit, who unites us with Christ and makes us partakers of all his benefits.

When the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, rebuking them because of partiality, he points them to the sacrament of Baptism: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit”—1 Corinthians 12, verse 13. This call for unity is closely connected with sanctification. For example, in Romans 6, verses 3 and 4, is set in the context of an antinomian misuse of the gospel of grace. Paul uses the argument of Baptism to show how it reveals union with Christ, which cannot but result in newness of life. The rich grace of God in Baptism is not received through obedience but can be forfeited through disobedience. Paul uses this also to stir up believers to watchfulness.

The epistles especially place Baptism between the redemptive historical realities of Christ’s salvation, and the personal application of that salvation. As a testimony and a seal of that salvation, Baptism is a call and motivation to faith in Christ, unity of the church, and holiness of its members. The opposite side is a warning against neglecting such a great salvation signified in Baptism.

Baptism as a covenant sign and seal. We will now deal with the important aspect of the doctrine of Christian Baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. God’s covenant was formally revealed to Abraham and his seed. The sign God gave for that was circumcision. The Lord declared: “I am the LORD thy God.” That is the heart of God’s covenant. Throughout the rest of Scripture, God addresses his covenant people as “my people.” Israel was his covenant people. That covenant bond involved his promise to be their God, his claim on their lives to belong to him, to live out of him and unto him, as well as his threat if they should disobey.

Though the revelation of Christ is clearer in the New Testament than the Old Testament, his gracious salvation is the same in both. God maintains one covenant of grace in both Testaments. In bringing people into a covenant relation to him, he makes them members of his church throughout all ages. During the Old Testament dispensation, the covenant mark was male circumcision. In Genesis 15, God established his covenant with Abraham. Abram cut several animals in half and created a pathway between the halves. He kept the birds from picking at them until the sun went down, then deep sleep fell upon him. Then he heard God speak, and he saw a “smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces.” This ancient method of confirming a covenant was an oath of self-malediction. Covenant makers were saying, “If I do not keep my part of the covenant, let me be slain like these animals.” In this case, God alone walked through the pieces, showing his faithfulness to his covenant Word. It also shows that God and God alone put himself in a covenant with Abraham and his descendants.

God established his covenant first with the patriarchs, and later with the people of Israel. In Genesis 17, God gave Abraham and his seed a lasting sign of his covenant—circumcision. This sign involved blood being shed as a piece of skin was cut off. God wanted to seal the covenant with Israel and their children. On the eighth day after birth, all male babies had to be circumcised. The promises of the covenant were the reason for the children’s circumcision. Then the children were part of the church of Israel.

We clearly find this in Joel 2, verse 16: “Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble

the elders, gather the children, and those that suck the breasts.” The children were comprehended in the covenant of God, and thus they received the sign of the covenant. The same must be said of the children of New Testament believers. Because they are born to Christians parents, they are comprehended in God’s covenant and therefore they must be baptized.

There is a general agreement as to the legitimacy of the Baptism of adult believers, but there is no such unanimity respecting the lawfulness of baptizing their children. The Baptist churches deny that children are entitled to Baptism. But we believe that there is a Scriptural basis for Baptism of all children of believing parents. It is true that the children who are baptized cannot yet exercise faith. However, this is no hindrance for them to be baptized, as the children of the Jews were circumcised when they could not exercise faith either. Our children are baptized on the same basis, namely, because of God’s covenant and promises.

Circumcision was a minor operation. It was a mark in the flesh. Thus Israel was a marked nation, a people owned by God. Likewise, Baptism marks us. The saying is true that this mark can never be taken away. Even the flames of hell can never wipe away the water of Baptism. The children of the visible church bear God’s mark on their foreheads. It says what circumcision said of Israel: “These people are set apart.” Through circumcision, the Israelites came into a special relationship with God. This applies also to all who are baptized, both adults and children. We ought to be separated from the world, and to bring forth fruits worthy of faith and repentance. Circumcision is spoken of as an inward change of heart. The call was to circumcise the heart. This is confirmed in Romans 2, verse 29: “But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.” Baptism is not only a mark but also a seal of the covenant.

The Apostle Paul says, in Romans 4, that Abraham believed in Christ, even before he was circumcised, and therefore, that he was justified before God. After that, he received circumcision as a seal of the justification through faith. Circumcision sealed to Abraham the truth that he was justified by faith in the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ. It sealed God’s grace to his heart. The seal was fixed to the covenant and the promises of God. Viewed from God’s side, this was unnecessary, since he is the truth himself. But the Lord did this for Abraham’s sake, to strengthen his faith.

Baptism, like circumcision, seals the truth of God’s covenant and promises. The baptized person does not have to doubt whether God is sincere when he says to him, “for the promise is unto you.” God’s people receive the same confirmation Abraham received—they are justified by faith.

Circumcision culminates in the circumcision of Jesus Christ on the eighth day. Christ was circumcised as the seed of Abraham. He came to take and fulfill our side of God’s covenant perfectly. He fulfilled all righteousness. Christ was circumcised as the Lamb of God. He bore the mark of a sinner whose sin had to be removed because he bore that sin. The knife of circumcision shedding blood was the beginning of what would be fulfilled on the cross. The tiny piece of skin cut off foreshadowed his being “cut off out of the land of the living”—Isaiah 53, verse 8. Christ was circumcised as the Savior of sinners. The day of his circumcision, he received his name: Jesus—“Jehovah saves”. There is cleansing from guilt, and circumcision of the heart in him, so that in faith we will call his name Jesus—Savior!

Colossians 2:11 and 12 clearly proceeds on the assumption that Baptism has taken the place of circumcision. This implies that all the blessings and obligations of the covenant in the Old Testament for the people of Israel have now also come upon the church of the New Testament. Churches of the Reformation have clearly expressed that Baptism has replaced circumcision. *The Belgic Confession*, article 34, shows how Christ unites Baptism and circumcision: “We believe and

confess that Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law, hath 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, hath instituted the sacrament of Baptism, instead thereof....Moreover, what circumcision was to the Jews, that Baptism is for our children. And for this reason Paul calls Baptism the circumcision of Christ.”

Let us now focus a bit more on infant Baptism. In Reformed circles, a solid ground is pointed out for baptizing infants. We practice infant Baptism because of the covenant and the promises of grace. We reject the doctrine that children have to be baptized on the basis of a presumptive regeneration. We do not baptize them because we believe they are saved, or that they will be. It is a shallow ground to baptize children of Adam on the basis of an assumption. We also reject the idea that we baptize children on the basis of the faith of their parents. No, the covenant and the covenant promise afford the only certain and objective ground for the Baptism of infants.

Lord’s Day 27, of *the Heidelberg Catechism* teaches us, in question #74, why infants are also baptized: “For since they, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them no less than to the adult; they must therefore be Baptized, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church; and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers as was done in the old covenant or testament by circumcision, instead of which Baptism is instituted in the new covenant.”

Does Baptism mean that all those who are baptized partake in the covenant and the promises in a saving way? In the lessons on the Covenant of Grace we explained that there are two kinds of covenant children. Think of Abraham. He circumcised all who belonged to his household, including Ishmael, his son. Nevertheless, Ishmael was not a believer. Actually, he and his descendants drifted away from God and from the precepts of the covenant. Esau was no different. Also in the church of the New Testament, we see that chaff and wheat are mixed together. Think of Ananias and Sapphira, Simon the sorcerer, and others. The apostle says, in Romans 9, verse 6, “For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” They are not all true Israelites who belong to the external Israel.

Here I recall the distinction of Calvin and other Reformers that the covenant should be considered in a twofold manner. First, the essence of the covenant, or the things that are promised by God. Secondly, concerning its administration in the visible church. We have to keep in mind what John the Baptist preached to the people of Israel: “The kingdom of heaven is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel”—Mark 1, verse 15. We may not despise the privileges of those who are baptized and belong to the visible church, but we must keep ourselves from becoming people who say, “We are Abraham’s children,” without doing the work of Abraham. Great are the privileges of Baptism, but more is required for salvation. We need the works of Abraham. We need Abraham’s grace. We need Abraham’s God. For there is no rest until we find rest in the Triune God of complete salvation.

Now we want to summarize what we have studied about Baptism. Baptism is a mark of membership in the church and covenant of God. God makes believers and their children members of his church and covenant. He revealed this to Abraham. He continued to do so through the generations in the Old Testament, and instead of commanding this to stop in the New Testament, he gives indications that he continues to include believers and their children in his church. Thus, they are to receive the sign of inclusion, namely, Baptism, which has come in the place of circumcision. What a message that is, that God calls and sets us in his church! What a calling that comes with it as well, to live as members of his church in faith, repentance, and new obedience, taking his promise,

warning, and call to heart.

Secondly, Baptism is a sign of cleansing and life, in and through Christ. The water resembles washing, giving life, and judgment. It all points to Christ as the one who endured the judgment to deliver from it, and be the source of cleansing from the guilt and power of sin, so that sinners may live a new life to God. This is so humbling because God is declaring that, of ourselves, we are filthy and dead. This is so amazing because God is declaring he gives this grace!

Thirdly, Baptism is a seal of God's promise of grace in Christ. Literally, Baptism is "into" the triune name. He connects his name to our name by his covenant bond. At the heart of God's covenant is his promise: "I will be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee." The Triune God seals his promise of grace to show how trustworthy he is, and he gives such a foundation for faith. He even promises to give his Spirit to apply to us all the grace in Christ.

In the fourth place, Baptism involves the well-known three parts of *the Heidelberg Catechism*: misery, deliverance and gratitude. Baptism points to our misery. Only the filthy need cleansing. We are admonished to abhor and humble ourselves before God, and seek our cleansing, not in ourselves, but outside ourselves in Christ Jesus. Baptism seals and testifies of our deliverance from this misery. Baptism declares to us the promise of the Triune God concerning the washing away of our sins through Christ, our adoption as children of God, and the applying work of the Holy Spirit. Baptism admonishes and obliges us to new obedience and a life of gratitude. Baptism calls us to cleave to this Triune God, trust in him, and love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength as well as to forsake the world, crucify our old nature, and walk in a new and holy life.

Fifthly, Baptism is of great importance. God promises to remember his covenant, and to fulfill his promises. "He hath remembered his covenant for ever, the word which he commanded to a thousand generations. Which covenant he made with Abraham, and his oath unto Isaac; and confirmed the same unto Jacob for a law, and to Israel for an everlasting covenant"—Psalm 105. Baptism is of great comfort to God's people by sealing unto them the promises of God. It is also a visible preaching to the entire congregation about that fountain which the Lord has opened for sin and uncleanness. And Christ gave Baptism to his church as a solemn pledge that the good work he began, he will complete on his return.

Thank you for following this lesson on Christian Baptism. We still have another sacrament to study. So, in the next lecture, we want to consider the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. May God bless you.