

# Studies & Actions of the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in America

## THE REPORT OF THE STUDY COMMITTEE ON QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE VALIDITY OF CERTAIN BAPTISMS

[15th General Assembly (1981), Appendix P, pages 416-428.]

[Baptism and Non-Communing Membership](#)

[Appendix P: The Report of the Study Committee on Questions Relating to the Validity of Certain Baptisms](#)

[Appendices to the Report on the Validity of Certain Baptisms](#)

[Minority Report](#)

### Information leading up to the 1987 Report:

#### BAPTISM

##### **Fifth PCA General Assembly (1977), Section 5-33A, p. 63 : Baptism and Non-Communing Membership**

The Committee makes the following report to the General Assembly on the teaching of the Confession, Catechisms and Book of Church Order regarding infant baptism and non-communicant membership: The primary passages dealing with these matters are:

*Westminster Confession*, chapters XXV, par. 2; XXVII, par. 1 and 4; *Larger Catechism* Question 165; *Shorter Catechism* 91 and 95; Book of Church Order 2-1; 6-1; 57-4; 58-1.

The Standards of the PCA define the visible church universal as consisting "of all who make profession of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, together with their children" (BCO 2-1; WCF XXV, 2). A particular congregation or denomination is defined as those who have been formally recognized as believers and their children, and who have been solemnly admitted by the sacrament of baptism (BCO 4-1,4; 6-1; 57-4; 58-1; LC 166).

The Westminster Confession and Catechisms teach that baptism is not to be administered to anyone outside of the visible church. In the case of adult converts, they are viewed as members of the visible church universal by virtue of their profession of faith in Christ and obedience to Him (WCF XXV, 2; LC 166; SC 97; cf. BCO 2-1; 6-1). They are thus eligible to receive baptism, which is the solemn admission of the party into a particular congregation of the visible church (WCF XXVIII, 1; LC 165). The same is true of the children of believers. They are by birth and covenant, members of the visible church universal, and should be recognized as such, and should be solemnly admitted to a particular congregation by the sacrament of baptism (WCF XXVIII, 4; LC 166; SC 95; BCO 57-4; 58-1).

This means that a particular congregation should carry on its rolls those who are members of the visible church universal, and who have been solemnly admitted by baptism to a particular church. Likewise, a particular congregation should carry on its rolls as non-communing members children of believers, who have been solemnly admitted to a particular congregation by baptism.

*The Assembly adopted this portion of the report.*

##### **Twelfth PCA General Assembly (1985) Section 13-23, p. 85 : Ad-Interim Committee on Baptism**

TE Carl W. Bogue, Jr., Chairman, led in prayer and presented the report on the Committee. See Appendix R,

pp. 347ff. for the text of the report.

(Clerk's Note : Recommendations 1 and 2 were handled at this time. The entire text is included here for greater continuity. The report was arrested in order to proceed to the special order of the day.)

**Recommendations:**

1. That local sessions are the best equipped, as well as being accountable under God, for judging whether the necessary criteria for valid baptism are present in a particular situation. *Adopted.*
2. The one presented for Christian baptism as an infant by parents who profess the Christian faith, which parents are later judged to lack a credible profession, has nevertheless received Christian baptism and ought not to be re-baptized. *Adopted.*
3. That one who is baptized as a supposed convert upon profession of the Christian faith, but who subsequently believes himself to have been unregenerate at the time of his baptism, has nevertheless received Christian baptism and ought not to be re-baptized. *Adopted.*
4. That this report be commended to sessions as an acceptable summary of Scripture and the *Westminster Standards* on which to base recommendation numbers 2 and 3. *Adopted.*

**Fifteen PCA General Assembly (1987), Section 15-74, p. 162 : Ad-Interim Committee on Baptism**

The Assembly returned to the report of the Committee (See 15-70, p. 156). The Minority Report's recommendations were adopted as the substitute motion and then adopted. (See Appendix P, p. 416ff. for the text of the report).

1. That the Assembly receive both the Committee and the Minority Reports, commending them to the attention of its churches and lower courts as information. [Appendix P, p. 416 (see below).] *Adopted.*
2. That the Assembly leave decisions in these matters to be made, on a case by case basis, by the lower courts, subject to normal review and control or judicial processes. *Adopted.*

**15th General Assembly, 1987, Appendix P, p. 416-422.**

**APPENDIX P**

**THE REPORT OF THE STUDY COMMITTEE ON QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE VALIDITY OF CERTAIN BAPTISMS**

**PREFACE TO THE REPORT**

In accordance with the action of the last General Assembly, the Study Committee is resubmitting its report to this General Assembly.

A key factor involved in the postponement by the last Assembly of action on this report was an awareness of the need for the elders of the denomination to have adequate time to study the report. The Committee therefore thought it wise, now that the Assembly has had adequate time to study the report, to re-focus on that which the Assembly has studied and to continue to postpone introducing another question with its new study material until this most basic question is resolved.

Not only did the Committee think it wise to refocus only on the first and most important question, it was also prohibited from conducting study sessions on the remaining question by the cost restraints placed on it by the Committee on Administration complying with the actions of the last General Assembly. Thus the Committee respectfully re-submits its original report and offers its recommendations for adoption. Work on the remaining question will be aided by knowing the mind of the Assembly on the Scriptural argument undergirding the Committee's recommendations concerning the first main question.

In re-submitting its report and recommendations, the Committee has made some changes which it calls to the attention of the Assembly. Other than these changes, the report and its recommendations are the same as that which was submitted last year. Some revisions have been made to the paragraph reflecting the historical survey of the actions of American Presbyterian Churches. They consist of the removal of reference to a judicial case,

because the significance of the action is technically ambiguous, and very slight editorial changes that this removal necessitated.

The major change is the inclusion of another recommendation (numbered in this report as 5). This recommendation was necessitated by the fact that a question, posed by the Western Carolinas Presbytery, has not been answered by the General Assembly as the study had originally assumed. The Committee is recommending the answer originally proposed both by the Sub-Committee on Judicial Business and the Committee of Commissioners on Judicial Business. This additional recommendation has triggered a partial rewriting of the second introductory paragraph to make reference to the new recommendation and at the same time to clarify the paragraph.

With these words of explanation, the Committee re-submits its report revised as indicated above.

## THE REPORT

The Study Committee has had committed to it certain questions raised by Grace Presbytery and by Western Carolinas Presbytery, and also the proposed answers to these questions offered by the Subcommittee on Judicial Business, a minority of that Subcommittee, and by the Committee on Commissioners. The questions which this committee was asked to deal with can be essentially reduced to two: (I) What, if anything, would make the baptism of a church invalid as a Christian baptism?, and (II) Has one who was presented for baptism or christening by non-Christian parents, or one who was baptized as a supposed convert but without real saving faith, received Christian baptism?

The Study Committee adjudged that its task was restricted to these two items and it adjudges that the answer to these two questions will answer all but one of the questions of the two presbyteries. This report addresses itself to the first question and propose three recommendations (1,2,3) to respond to this first question. A subsequent report will address itself to the second question after further study has attempted to reach a consensus on the understanding of what the Scripture says on this question (recommendation 6). The Committee considers the only other two questions raised about baptism to be adequately answered by responses on which both the Committee of Commissioners on Judicial Business and the Sub-Committee on Judicial Business have concurred. The Study Committee is recommending these proposed responses as answers to these other two questions (recommendations 4 and 5).

### I. Is the baptism of certain "church" bodies invalid?

The committee approached this question constrained by the biblical teaching Eph. 4:5; cf. Westminster Confession of Faith xxviii, 7) that there is one baptism. Thus it addresses the question of valid or invalid baptism not as one of rebaptism. In approaching the subject of a valid or invalid baptism, the Committee was instructed by the analogy of Acts 19:1-7. In this account, the disciples of John the Baptist are not rebaptized with a second Christian baptism, even though of course one may speak in some sense of a rebaptism, since they had been baptized into John the Baptist's baptism, but when baptized by Paul in the name of the Lord Jesus they were baptized for the first time with Christian baptism. Even though the baptism of John is not regarded as invalid but as not the baptism of Jesus, this passage does provide the church an example, by analogy, of evaluating a previous baptism and then proceeding to Christian baptism if that former baptism is not regarded as Christian. It should thus be agreed that it is an appropriate act to administer Christian baptism if a previous baptism is regarded as invalid, and it should also be agreed that this is not a second Christian baptism or a rebaptism.

In conducting its study the Committee sought to be guided by our supreme standard, the Scriptures, and by our subordinate standards, the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, which we have sincerely received and adopted as containing the system of doctrine of the Scriptures. Since the Scriptures do not deal directly with our question, we have followed the hermeneutical rule of our Confession of deducing "good and necessary" consequences (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, I, 6) from the Scriptures in solving this question and have

especially utilized these consequences already drawn by our confessional standards.

In addition, we have consulted writers on the subject from various ages of the church, study reports in various presbyteries of our own and sister Presbyterian churches, and we have reflected again on a number of concrete situations ranging from the ancient Donatist controversy up to and including the concrete situations in a local congregation.

In particular, we have been especially constrained to consider the decisions of our spiritual predecessors, i.e., the highest courts of American Presbyterian churches (cf. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, xxxi, 2) who have dealt with the same question. Two considerations guided the historical research. The first was to cite the actions of "spiritual predecessors." Thus later decisions of main-line Presbyterian bodies which the PCA (or the RPCES) had left were not cited. The second was to cite decisions where the assemblies made a judgment on the question since the presbytery had asked for such a judgment and therefore not to cite any postponement or any decision in which the assembly simply referred the matter back to sessions with or without reference to the Standards or earlier assembly decisions.

In its historical survey, the Committee found that with one exception the General Assemblies of American Presbyterian churches where making a judgment on the matter have taken the position of non-validity for Roman Catholic baptism. This was done in 1845 by the Old School Assembly and the reasons given in the report have prevailed until today. The Cumberland Presbyterian Church took the same position in 1876. The United Presbyterian Church in North America, in various actions from 1869 to 1871, took the same position. The Presbyterian Church, U.S., commonly referred to as the Southern Presbyterian Church, had consistently taken the same position of the non-validity of Romish baptism. The Southern Church referred to the action of the General Assembly, Old School, of 1845, but took a full action of its own in 1871. The Assembly of 1884 reaffirmed the action of 1871 and the Assembly of 1914 declined to rescind its action of 1884. The one exception is the action of the 1981 Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, espousing and reiterating the objections of Charles Hodge to the decision of the 1845 General Assembly.

As this historical survey has indicated, the question of the non-validity of baptism has often become the question of the validity or non-validity of Roman Catholic baptism. In the question posed by the presbytery this is the group first named and this group was mentioned on the assembly floor as that which presents to our churches at home and abroad through the conversions of previous members the most pressing pastoral concern. These historical and pastoral concerns, coupled with the unique historical and theological perspective that this church presents, convinced the Committee that its study should focus on the baptism of this group as a test case without presuming to restrict its study or the principles discovered to this group.

The Committee considered it one of its first responsibilities to ascertain what is involved in true Christian baptism. The form comprises water and the name of the Trinity (Mt. 28:19, sometimes expressed, however, by the name of the Savior Jesus alone as the mediatorial representative of the Trinity; cf. Acts 2:38 and elsewhere in Acts and the New Testament, *Westminster Confession of Faith* xxviii, 2; Larger Catechism 165; Shorter Catechism 94). The basic assumption, intention or design is that the Christian rite or sacrament of baptism is being performed. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (xxviii, 1) summarizes the biblical truths in reference to baptism when it says that it is a sacrament "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" (cf. Larger Catechism 165; Shorter Catechism 94). Thus baptism teaches the doctrine of union with Christ and its implications for the believer and also union with Christ's people, both His spiritual body and the visible Church ("for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church, *Westminster Confession of Faith*, xxxviii, 1, reflecting such biblical passages as Acts 2:38-42, cf. also Larger Catechism 165). Furthermore, baptism is given as a sacrament to Christ's Church to be administered by the Church in its ministry ("which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world" (*Westminster Confession of Faith* xviii, 1 reflecting Mt. 28:19, 20; cf. xxvii, 4, and xxviii, 2, and Larger Catechism 164). With this generally agreed upon conception of what baptism is, according to the Scriptures

and the summary of the Scriptural truth provided by the confessional documents, the committee examined the two approaches to the question of the validity of baptism using the Roman Catholic baptism as a test case as previously indicated.

#### A. An Analysis of the Arguments for the Validity of Roman Catholic Baptism.

The committee considered the arguments presented by the RPCES Synod's committee report. In doing so, it followed the advice and urging of that committee to read and consider the arguments of the most vigorous American exponent of that position, C. Hodge. The article by Hodge, written in opposition to the 1845 Assembly's decision on the matter, which Hodge himself felt constrained to note was by a vote of 169 to 8, with 6 abstaining, appeared in the Princeton Review of 1845, pp. 444, ff., and has been reproduced in Hodge's Church Polity, pp. 191 ff. The writer argues that three things are necessary for there to be a valid baptism, i.e., washing with water, in the name of the Trinity, and with the ostensible professed design to comply with the command of Christ, i.e., intent. The conclusion reached by Hodge was that the three elements are present in Roman Catholic baptism and therefore that it is valid.

The committee was convinced that this case was both inadequate and also at points in error in reference to Roman Catholic baptism. Its inadequacy is seen by the fact that this appraisal or system of analysis would also of necessity declare as valid the baptism of certain professedly Christian but sectarian groups, such as the Mormons. Usually those arguing for the Roman Catholic baptism would agree that these other baptisms are not valid because in the second and third aspects, in the name of the Trinity and with true design or intent, these other baptisms are not really Biblical and Christian in their use of the Trinity or in their understanding of the design or intent of baptism. But it is just this objection with respect to the true design or intent that the committee thinks applies also to Roman Catholic baptism. At this point we see both an inadequacy and an error.

Although the three elements are present in Mormon baptism, they are now seen to be inadequate as formal and external items. They may now only function as significant items when they are controlled by and expressions of the overarching truth of the Gospel. Without the truth of the Gospel, there is no true and valid baptism even when these elements are present. It is this larger perspective which is necessary and which is lacking in Hodge's application of the three elements to the Roman Catholic church.

As one step forward to this necessary larger perspective, one can see further the inadequacy and error of this three-element approach by comparing it with our confessional evaluation of the other sacrament, the Lord's Supper, as it is administered in the Roman Catholic Church as the mass. Here also one can devise a formal and external description of the elements necessary for a valid Lord's Supper which is properly analogous to that given for a valid baptism, i.e., the prescribed material, bread and wine, the prescribed formula, the words of institution, and the intent, "with the ostensible professed design to comply with the command of Christ" (Minutes, RPCES, 1981, p. 45). But notice, in spite of the fact that these three analogous elements are present, our confessional standards adjudge the Roman Catholic observance of the Lord's Supper, the mass, to be invalid. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (xxix, 2) says "that the Papist sacrifice of the mass (as they call it) is most abominably injurious to Christ's one, only sacrifice " The *Confession* (xxix, 6) goes on to say that the doctrine of the mass "overthroweth the nature of the sacrament, and hath been, and is, the cause of manifold superstitions, yea, of gross idolatries" (italics added).

With this question of doctrine we have come to a larger aspect of the question. It is not only the doctrine of the sacrament itself that is in view, but also the question of the doctrine concerning the church as one faithful or degenerate with respect to the Gospel. It is this larger perspective concerning the church which has already brought Presbyterians in fact to recognize the invalidity of Mormon baptism, even when the three elements are present, and the invalidity of Unitarian baptism (Minutes of General Assembly, 1814; Minutes of General Assembly, [Southern], 1871). This brings us then to a consideration of the case for the invalidity of Roman Catholic baptism.

## B. The Presentation of the Arguments for the Invalidity of Roman Catholic Baptism.

Although the arguments for this view have surfaced in part in the preceding section and especially in the immediately preceding paragraph, the committee felt it appropriate to present these arguments given in 1845, and also in 1871, in a compact summary form, and then both evaluate and expand that summary for the benefit of the church. The committee is convinced that the essence of the argument was and is persuasive and should guide the church in its decision. The following is our schematic summary of the report of the committee presented to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (Old School) and adopted by that Assembly in 1845 (Minutes, 1845, pages 34-37). This summary of ours also reflects similar aspects of the 1871 report (Minutes, p. 30). Since these reports are not readily available to the church today, the 1845 report in its entirety and the central portion of the 1871 report relating to Roman Catholic and Unitarian baptism are made available in two appendices at the end of this report.

- (1) The Romish communion is not a true church and therefore its sacraments cannot be true and valid sacraments.
- (2) The Romish priests are not ministers of Christ and therefore the rites administered by them cannot be regarded as the ordinances of Christ.
- (3) The doctrine or meaning of the sacrament of baptism is so corrupted by the Romish communion that it invalidates the sacrament of baptism.

These arguments now need to be set forth in greater detail and evaluated. The force of them is, of course, cumulative, but any one of them, if true, would in itself make the baptism invalid.

- (1) The first argument is considered one of the most compelling by the committee. There is an inseparable relationship between the church and the ordinances. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (xxv, 3) aptly summarizes the truth of Matthew 28:19, 20, and other Biblical passages in indicating that "unto this Catholic visible Church Christ hath given the . . . ordinances of God..." Further, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (xxviii, 1) speaks of baptism as ordained by Jesus Christ "for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church" (cf., e.g., Acts 2:38-42) and as a sacrament "to be continued in His church until the end of the world" (cf. Mt. 28:19, 20). This relationship is further demonstrated by the fact that the confession appropriately indicates that the administration of the ordinances is one of the marks by which one determines the fidelity of a church or its degeneration so that it is no longer a church of Christ (xxv, 4, 5). It is this perspective that has uniformly persuaded our church, and other true churches of Christ, to regard the baptism of the Unitarian church or the Mormon church as invalid even when a trinitarian formula may have been used, and even when a design or intent of relating the person in some way to Jesus Christ and His death is asserted.

The decision of the 1845 General Assembly made reference to the decision of the 1835 General Assembly (Minutes, p. 490) which "Resolved, That it is the deliberate and decided judgment of this Assembly that the Roman Catholic Church has essentially apostatized from the religion of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and therefore cannot be recognized as a Christian Church." The General Assembly of 1879 in reaffirming this decision of 1835 wisely reminded the Assembly that this decision was in accord with the Confession of Faith in its evaluation of the headship of the Roman Catholic Church, and thus of that Church itself. (This evaluation is true for all the variant forms of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, xxv, 6). The decision of 1879 (Minutes p. 630) reads as follows:

Resolved, That this Assembly, in full accordance with the words of our Confession of Faith respecting the Church of Rome and its so-called spiritual head, do now reaffirm the deliverance, upon this subject, of the Assembly of 1835, as applying to that Roman hierarchy headed by the pope, falsely claiming to be the Church; which, opposed absolutely and irreconcilably to the doctrines of Holy Scripture, is corrupting and degrading a large part of Christ's Church over which it has usurped supreme control.

Further evidence for this appraisal of the Roman Catholic Church would be the appraisal of the mass already referred to as "most abominably injurious to Christ's one, only sacrifice," as "contrary to the nature of this sacrament, and to the institution of Christ" and as a doctrine which "over-throweth the nature of the sacrament, and hath been, and is, the cause of manifold superstitions; yea, of gross idolatries" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, xxix, 2, 4, 6). The committee thinks that this apostasy of the Roman Catholic Church does not need to be further established.

A summary statement in the decision of 1845 states the matter with perceptiveness in regard to the implication for baptism: "As certainly then, as the dogmas and practices of papal Rome are not the holy religion of Christ, must it be conceded, that the papal body is not a Church of Christ...; and if not, then ... the rite they call baptism, is not, in any sense, to be regarded as valid Christian baptism." In making this appraisal, the committee reminded the Assembly that as long ago as 1790 the Assembly had made the correlation between true church and true ordinances with the corollary of a false church and invalid ordinances. Although Hodge vigorously challenged this appraisal of the Roman Catholic Church by the General Assemblies of 1835 and 1845, insisting that even Rome's doctrine of salvation manifested that it was a church of Christ, the General Assembly held to its evaluation of 1845, in the reaffirmation of 1879. The Southern Assembly of 1871 took the same position in regard to the Roman Catholic Church as these other assemblies did.

The study committee turned to the book of Galatians because it dealt with a situation analogous to that of the Roman Catholic Church. The false teachers at Galatia taught that one is saved only by a combination of faith and works (Gal. 3:1-5, 11; 5:11; 6:12-15). This is also the teaching of Roman Catholicism as evidenced by the decision of the Council of Trent, decisions still in effect. The Apostle Paul called such a message "a different gospel which is really not another," indicated that they did "distort the gospel of Christ," and said that those who taught and held it were "accursed" by God (Galatians 1:6-9). Paul sought to rid the congregation of their presence and teaching.

The Apostle John says that the false teachers and leaders that he opposed "went out from us ... in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19). John's verdict covering a group existing alongside of his own fellowship as not part of the apostolic fellowship or communion, made us realize such a verdict would also have to be rendered on a group like that of the Galatian false teachers who were adjudged with equal severity by Paul, if and when they existed as a separate entity. The similarity between the false teachers in the book of Galatians and the Roman Catholic Church is so close that the committee was compelled by the Scripture to come to the same verdict on that group that the Apostle Paul had, and also by implication as the Apostle John had, in an analogous situation.

The effect of this Scriptural perspective for the validity of baptism should be evident. If the message is no gospel, indeed, a distortion of the gospel, and they are accursed by God (Gal. 1:6-9), then any such church group would come under the same indictment. John says that those who leave the teaching of Christ "do not have God" (2 John 9); and Paul says of those who embrace the doctrine of the false teachers of Galatia that "Christ will be of no benefit" (Gal. 5:2) and that they are "severed from Christ" and not in the sphere of grace (Gal. 5:4). Would their baptism be valid, even if with water, in the name of the Trinity, and with the intent to comply with Christ's Command? May those who are severed from Christ, from grace, and from God, administer Christ's ordinance of baptism? The committee, on the basis of this consideration of Scripture, joins with the early unanimous verdict of the courts of American Presbyterianism on the Roman Catholic Church and its baptism. It is constrained to answer in the negative.

One of the problems remaining is the fact that John Calvin resisted the urging of the Anabaptists that he, having been baptized by the Roman Catholics, should be (re)baptized (Institutes 4.15.16-18). His response must be understood in terms of the uniqueness of the situation and not wrongly generalized. He, of course, resisted the Anabaptists' desire to have him repudiate his infant baptism and receive baptism as an adult believer. The effect that this situation had upon him can be seen in his insisting that Paul did not really baptize the disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus and in his insisting that the baptism of John the Baptist is Christian baptism. This insistence, contrary to the text of the Scriptures, is so that he can assert that those were not "re

baptisms" at all in opposition to the Anabaptists. The denomination in which Calvin was baptized was a church in flux, and coming to but not yet beyond the crossroads (cf., Institutes 4.2.11). It is not yet the church of the counter-reformation, the Council of Trent and its anathemas on the doctrine of justification by faith alone (see H. J. Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, "Sixth Session, Decree Covering Justification" and particularly "Canon 9," "If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification . . . let him be anathema.") That pre-Reformation church in flux is the church in which Calvin and many of the other Reformation believers had been members. Thus Calvin and the church of today stand at different vantage points in evaluating the Roman Catholic Church, i.e., the church of his infancy, the pre-reformation church, and the Roman Catholic church post-reformation and post Council-of-Trent. The analogy could be drawn between certain congregational churches in New England before and after the transition to Unitarianism.

The study committee is convinced that this first argument is a firm and true principle and should be followed in regard to the Roman Catholic Church as it is followed in regard to such groups as the Unitarian Church and the Mormon Church.

Just as we have not received members by letter of transfer from the Roman Catholic Church because we do not believe it to be a true church, so we should not receive its baptism, which we acknowledge admits one into the visible church (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, xxviii, 1) as a true and valid baptism.

(2) The second reason given by the General Assembly of 1845 was that the Romish priest are not ministers of Christ and the Word, and therefore the rites administered by them cannot be regarded as the ordinances of Christ. Although your study committee acknowledges the truth of this reason, it regards it as a corollary of reason number (1) and an application of that conclusion and not actually an independent argument.

The perspective of our Confession, which reflects the outcome of the early Donatist controversy, when it says that the efficacy of a sacrament does not depend upon the piety of the one that administers it (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, xxvii, 3), is really dealing with a different situation. That earlier Donatist controversy dealt with the question of a minister who succumbed momentarily to the pressure of persecution. The church in which he ministered was more or less pure in upholding the Gospel. His succumbing to the pressure of persecution did not thus invalidate the sacraments he had administered.

The situation in view in the Roman Catholic priesthood is not that which our Confession and the Donatist controversy addresses. It is that of a ministry and a church which, in the words of Paul describing the false teachers of Galatia, preach "a different gospel, which is not another," "distort the gospel of Christ" and thus lie under the Apostolic judgment, "let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:6-9). Therefore, inevitably, in this case, Romish church and Romish ministry are evaluated alike.

(3) The doctrine or meaning of the sacrament of baptism is so corrupted by the Romish communion that it invalidates the sacrament of baptism.

The committee is persuaded that this argument like argument number (2) is really a sub-point or corollary of argument number (1). When the Gospel's doctrine of justification is repudiated, then the church, its ministry, and its sacraments, all stand under the judgment of the Apostle Paul of "no gospel," of distortion of the Gospel of Christ and of being accursed by God (Gal. 1:6-9). Although the doctrine of the mass can itself directly challenge the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ and its sufficiency and thus by itself be so corrupting that it invalidates that sacrament, and although there are many erroneous features to the doctrine of baptism in the Roman Catholic Church (e.g., baptismal regeneration and forgiveness solely through the operation of the sacrament), in the case of the sacrament of baptism it is not these errors that invalidate the sacrament but rather the overarching repudiation of the Gospel of grace alone through faith alone that invalidates the Roman Catholic Church, its message, and its sacraments.

The committee is persuaded that our church is not being called on to make a relative judgment here of how



theologically and biblically erroneous the Roman Catholic Church's view of baptism may be. Rather, it is at each and every place confronted with the heart question of the Scriptures, the Gospel, and with the Apostle Paul's radical and absolute judgment.

In coming to this conclusion, we are provided a perspective from which to address the specific question of the Grace Presbytery. It raised the question whether "the recipients of so-called baptism, by a religious body, which claimed the sacraments as a part of a process of justification (as in the case of Roman Catholic, Church of Christ, or Lutheran churches) proper recipients of Christian baptism?" This committee would advise the Church to distinguish between unfortunate, indeed, serious, errors and that which is so corrupting that the so-called baptism is invalid. The same could be said for the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in Lutheran churches. The committee would adjudge that the baptism should be regarded as invalid either when the doctrine of the sacrament absolutely and directly contradicts and denies the gospel (e.g. the mass) or when it is administered in a church that denies the gospel. When the erroneous doctrine is "inconsistently" held in correlation with an overarching affirmation of the essence of the gospel, the sacrament of baptism must be regarded in that larger perspective. In short, from that perspective even the misguided "piety or intention" of a true church of Christ should not be regarded as invalidating the validity of its baptism.

The three arguments given are in essence one - is the church a true church of Christ. And that question is finally one of fidelity to the Gospel. Christ's Apostle Paul speaks the verdict of the Head of the Church when he says that those, are "severed from Christ, are seeking to be justified by law" (Gal. 5:4). We are constrained albeit with great sadness, to echo that verdict which of necessity also falls upon the Roman 86 Catholic Church. And thus we are compelled to admit that its sacraments are invalid and especially that its baptism is invalid.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

(1) That the Assembly adopt the following recommendations with respect to Roman Catholic baptism:

**A.** that the General Assembly counsel that the baptism of those churches that have so degenerated from the Gospel of Christ as to be no churches of Christ (cf., Westminster Confession of Faith, xxv, 5; e.g., Unitarian, Mormon, Roman Catholic) is not to be regarded as valid Christian baptism; and

**B.** that converts from those groups be instructed in this matter and be given Christian baptism; and

**C.** that sessions and pastors deal with any of those converts who have difficulties with this matter in the same way that they deal with converts from a non-religious background who have difficulties with baptism for themselves.

(2) That the Assembly adopt the following recommendation as a further answer to the question of Grace Presbytery: A. that erroneous views of baptism, which do not absolutely contradict and overturn the Gospel, do not invalidate the baptisms in these true , churches.

(3) That the Assembly consider and vote upon the answer given by both the Committee of Commissioners on Judicial Business and the Sub-Committee on Judicial Business to the question of Western Carolinas Presbytery which is now also recommended by the Study Committee with the addition of citations from the confessional standards, as follows:

**Q.** May baptisms properly be administered to individuals making profession of faith, but who do not intend to become members of the requested congregation? If so, under what circumstances?

A. Baptism should not be administered to those individuals making profession of faith but who do not intend to become members of the requested congregation ("Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ... for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church..." *Westminster Confession of Faith* xxviii, 1; "Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament ... whereby the parties baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church . . Larger Catechism 165; "Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church..." Larger Catechism 166).

(4) That the Assembly consider and vote upon the answer given by both the Committee of Commissioners on Judicial Business and the Sub-Committee on Judicial Business to the question of Western Carolinas Presbytery, which is now also recommended by the Study Committee as follows:

**Q.** May infant baptism properly be administered to covenant children of persons who are not members of the particular congregation asked? (For personal reasons they have not joined Trinity, but hold membership in the CRC where they formerly resided.) If so, under what circumstances?

**A.** Ordinarily infant baptism should be administered only to covenant children of persons who are members of the requested congregation. However, baptism is not to be unnecessarily delayed (BCO 56-1); therefore, it would be proper for a minister to baptize the child of members of another church where those members find it impossible or impracticable to return to their home church due to an occupational assignment (military, business, etc.). In every case such baptism should be administered only with the consent of the home Session, with proper notification of the baptism in order that due spiritual oversight may be given and accurate records kept.

Respectfully submitted:

Frank M. Barker, Jr.

Carl W. Bogue, Jr.

George W. Knight, III, Chairman

Paul G. Settle

Action of the 15th General Assembly on this report [excerpted from the Minutes of the Assembly]:

**15-70 Ad Interim Committee on Baptism**

TE Carl Bogue, chairman, led in prayer and presented the report (Appendix P, p. 416). Recommendations 1 - 4 were moved and seconded. Recommendation 1 of the Minority Report was moved and seconded in substitute of the majority's recommendation. The order of the day arrived before action was taken. See 15-74, p. 162 for action.

**15-74 Ad Interim Committee on Baptism**

The Assembly returned to the report of the Committee (See 15-70, p. 156). The Minority Report's recommendations were adopted as the substitute motion and then adopted. (See Appendix P, p. 416 for the [text of the report](#))

1. That the Assembly receive both the Committee and the Minority Reports, commending them both to the attention of its churches and lower courts as information. *Adopted.*
2. That the Assembly leave decisions in these matters to be made, on a case by case basis, by the lower courts, subject to normal review and control or judicial processes. *Adopted.*
3. That the Assembly discharge the Committee with thanks. *Adopted.*

## APPENDICES TO THE REPORT ON THE VALIDITY OF CERTAIN BAPTISMS

### 1. The Action of the General Assembly, Old School, of 1845, (Minutes, 1845, pages 34-37).

The Committee appointed to draw up a minute expressive of the views of the Assembly, presented a report, which was read and adopted, and is as follows, viz.

"The Committee appointed to prepare a minute expressive of the view of this Assembly, in returning a negative to Overture No. 6, leave to report.

"The question presented to this Assembly by Overture from the Presbytery of Ohio, 'Is Baptism in the Church of Rome Valid?' is one of a very grave character, and of deep practical importance. The answer to it must involve principles vital to the peace, the purity, and the stability of the church of God.

"After a full discussion carried through several days, this Assembly has decided, by a nearly unanimous vote [173 yeas to 8 nays], that *baptism so administered, is not valid*.

[Please note that there is a typographical error in the 1993 edition and in the 1997 reprint of the *PCA Digest*, Volume 2, that occurs on page 89 at this point, where the print edition reads "not invalid" and should instead read "not valid". We also note that the web version has been corrected as of Monday, 19 September 2005.]

"Because, since baptism is an ordinance established by Christ in his Church, (Form of Gov., chap. vii; Matt. xxviii. 19, 20,) and is to be administered only by a minister of Christ, duly called and ordained to be a steward of the mysteries of God, (Directory, chap. viii, sec. 1.) it follows that no rite administered by one who is not himself a duly ordained minister of the true Church of God visible, can be regarded as an ordinance of Christ, whatever be the name by which it is called, whatever the form employed in its administration. The so-called priest of the Romish communion are not ministers of Christ, for they are commissioned as agents of the papal hierarchy, which is not a Church of Christ, but the Man of Sin, apostate from the truth, the enemy of righteousness and of God. She has long lain under the curse of God, who has called his people to come out from her, that they be not partakers of her plagues.

"It is the unanimous opinion of all the Reformed churches, that the whole papal body, though once a branch of the visible church, has long since become utterly corrupt, and hopelessly apostate. It was a conviction of this which led to the reformation, and the complete separation of the reformed body from the papal communion. Luther and his coadjutors, being duly ordained presbyters at the time when they left the Romish communion, which then, though fearfully corrupt, was the only visible church in the countries of their abode, were fully authorized by the word of God, to ordain successors in the ministry, and so to extend and perpetuate the Reformed churches as true churches of Christ: while the contumacious adherence of Rome to her corruptions, as shown in the decisions of the Council of Trent, (which she adopts as authoritative,) cuts her off from the visible Church of Christ, as heretical and unsound. This was the opinion of the Reformers, and it is the doctrine of the Reformed churches to this day. In entire accordance to this is the decision of the General Assembly of our Church, passed in 1835, (See Minutes of General Assembly, vol. 8, p. 33) declaring the Church of Rome to be an apostate body.

"The decision by the Assembly of 1835 renders the return of a negative to the inquiry proposed by the Presbytery of Ohio *indispensable on the ground of consistency*; unless we be prepared to admit, in direct contradiction to the standards of the Presbyterian Church, that baptism is not an ordinance established by Christ in his Church exclusively and that it may be administered by an agent of the Man of Sin, an emissary of the prince of darkness; that it may be administered in sport or in blasphemy, and yet be valid as though administered by a duly commissioned steward of the mysteries of God.

"Nor can it be urged that the papal hierarchy is improving in her character, and gradually approximating to the scriptural standard. She claims to be infallible; her dogmas she promulgates as the doctrines of heaven; and she pronounces her heaviest anathema against any and every man who questions her authority, and refuses to bow to her decisions. She cannot recede from the ground she has assumed. She has adopted as her own, the decisions of the Council of Trent, which degrade the word of God; which claim equal authority for the Apocrypha as for the New Testament; and which declare the sense held and taught by holy mother church, on the authority of tradition and of the Fathers, to be the true and only sense of Scripture. All who deny this position, or who question her authority, she denounces with the bitterest curses.

"She thus perverts the truth of God; she rejects the doctrine of justification by faith; she substitutes human merit for the righteousness of Christ; and self-inflicted punishment for gospel repentance: She proclaims her so-called baptism, to be regeneration, and the reception of the consecrated wafer in the eucharist, to be the receiving of Christ himself, the source and fountain of grace, and with him all the grace he can impart. Is this the truth? Is reliance on this system, true religion? Can, then, the papal body be a Church?

"The Church, (i.e. the church visible,) as defined in our standards, is the whole body of those persons, together with their children, who make profession of *the holy religion of Christ*, and of submission to his laws. (Form of Gov. chap. ii, sec. 2) As certainly then, as the dogmas and practices of papal Rome are not *the holy religion of Christ*, must it be conceded, that the papal body is not a Church of Christ at all; and if not, then her agents, be they styled priest, bishops, archbishops, cardinals or pope, are not ministers of Christ in any sense; for they have no connection with his true visible Church; and not being true ministers of Christ, they have no power to administer Christian ordinances, and the rite they *call* baptism, is not, in any sense, to be regarded as valid Christian Baptism.

"Further, by the perverted meaning they affix, and the superstitious rites they have superadded to the ceremonies they perform under the name of baptism and the eucharist, the symbolical nature and true design of both the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper are lost sight of and utterly destroyed, - so that, could we by any possibility assign to her the *name of a Church*, she would still be a church without the two grand ordinances of the gospel: she neither administers Christian baptism, nor celebrates the supper of our Lord.

"Moreover, since, by the 11th canon of the Council of Trent, she declares the efficacy of her ordinances to depend upon the *intention* of the administrator, no man can know with certainty that her form of administration in any ordinance is not a mere mockery: no consistent papist can be certain that he has been duly baptized, or that he has received the veritable eucharist: he cannot *know*, that the priest who officiates at his altar is a true priest, nor that there is actually any one true priest, or any one prelate rightly consecrated in the whole papal communion. The papal hierarchy has by her own solemn act shrouded all her doings in uncertainty, and enveloped all her rites in hopeless obscurity. Even on this ground alone, the validity of her baptism might safely be denied.

"Nor is the fact that instances now and then occur of apparent piety in the members of her communion, and of intelligence, zeal, and conscientiousness in some of her priests, any ground of objection against the position here taken by this Assembly. The virtues of individuals do not purify the body of which they are members. We are to judge of the character of a body claiming to be a church of Christ, - not by the opinions or practices of its individual members, but by its standards and its allowed practices. Bound as he is by the authority of his church, - and that on pain of her heaviest malediction, - to understand the Scriptures only in the sense in which his church understands and explains them, a consistent papist cannot receive or hold the true religion, or the doctrines of grace. If he does, he must either renounce the papacy, or hypocritically conceal his true sentiments, or he must prepare to brave the thunders of her wrath. True religion and an intelligent adherence to papal Rome are utterly incompatible and impossible. The Church and the papacy are the repelling poles of the moral system.

"Difficulties may possibly arise in individual cases. It may not be easy at all times to say whether an applicant for admission into the Church of Christ has, or has not been baptized: whether he has been christened by a

popish pastor or not. In all such doubtful cases the session of a church must act according to the light before them. But it is safer and more conducive to peace and edification, to embrace a well established principle for our guidance, and act upon it firmly in the fear of God, leaving all consequences with him than to suffer ourselves, without any fixed principles, to be at the mercy of circumstances.

"While some other churches may hesitate to carry out fully the principles of the Reformation, in wholly repudiating popish baptism, as well as the popish mass, we, as Presbyterians, feel bound to act on the principle laid down by our Assembly, so long ago as 1790, (see Digest, pp. 94, 95,) that, so long as a body is by us recognized as a true church, are her ordinances to be deemed valid, and no longer.

"In 1835 the Assembly declared the papacy to be apostate from Christ, and no true church. As we do not recognize her as a portion of the visible Church of Christ, we cannot, consistently, view her priesthood as other than usurpers of the sacred functions of the ministry, her ordinances as unscriptural, and her baptism as totally invalid."

## **2. The central portion of the report relating to Roman Catholic and Unitarian baptism (Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S., 1871, p. 30).**

Our Church has always held, agreeably to the Scripture, that the administration of baptism may present irregularities or imperfections which are not to be approved, but the sacrament may still have substantial validity. It is plain from Scripture, that baptism has by the Lord Jesus Christ been given to His true visible Church catholic (see Matt. XXVIII, 19, 20; Acts ii, 41, 42; I. Cor. xii, 13; Book of Government, Chap. VII; Directory for Worship, Chap. VII, Sec.1), and cannot be out of her pale. The administration of this sacrament may be in two ways invalidated; either by the apostasy of the body wherein it is exercised, so that this society is no true part of Christ's visible Church; or by the utter change of corruption of the element and doctrine of the sacrament. And our Assemblies have correctly held, that the form called by the Popish communion "Christian baptism" has ceased, for both reasons, to be valid; because that society is declared in Scripture to be antichrist, and Babylon, and apostate, out of which the Lord requireth His "people to come, that they may not be partakers of her plagues;" and because she hath, with superstitious design, substituted a mixed element in place of water, which Christ ordained to be used as the emblem, and hath utterly corrupted the doctrine of holy baptism into an incantation working ex opere operato.

In other societies, as the Unitarian, their rites may have due regularity of outward form, and yet be no valid baptism, because their bodies are not true parts of Christ's visible Church. The validity of such cases therefore depends upon the claim of the communion in which they are administered to be true churches of Jesus Christ. But the scriptural mark of a true church is its holding forth the Word of God. (See Rom. iii. 2; 1 Tim. iii. 15; Book of Government, Chap. II, Sec. II; Confession of Faith, Chap. XXV, Sec. III.)

In view of the fact that several churches hold grave errors in connection with much saving truth, and that perhaps no church receives in everything the exact mind of the Spirit, it may be asked with what degree of strictness or liberality this mark of a true visible Church is to be applied. It seems to us consonant with the Scriptures and the judgment of charity to answer, that so long as any communion so retains the essential truths of God's Word and the aids of the Holy Ghost as to save souls by its ministrations, it shall be held a true, though imperfect, member of His visible body. Though it may omit or impugn some principles which we have received from God, and may even deny to our ordinances all recognition, and to our communion all church character, yet we may not imitate its uncharitableness; so long as Christ visibly entrusts it with His saving Word and Spirit, we are bound to recognize it as His visible body, notwithstanding its errors, and to pray for its attainment of a more peaceable unity in the bonds of the truth. But in judging the tendency of its ordinances to save souls, it is obviously proper that we shall estimate those ministrations as a consistent whole, as set forth by this communication. If their only tendency as a whole, taken as it expounds them to its members, is destructive to souls, then we cannot admit that it is a pillar and ground of saving truth, merely because of some disjointed fragments of the gospel verities, mixed with heresies which, if heartily accepted by the people as taught, must be fatal to souls; or because a few persons, through the special teaching of God's Spirit, leading

them to select the spiritual meat and reject the poison, actually find Christ under those ministrations; for the proper function of a visible Church is instrumentally to communicate to its disciples spiritual discernment, and not to presuppose it; and the happy escape of these souls from damnable error is due to the special grace of God shielding them against the regular effect of these ministrations, rather than employing and blessing them. If this rule of judgment be denied, then might a valid church character possibly be established for an association of infidels investigating parts of God's Word only for purposes of cavil, since the Almighty Spirit might, against these purposes, employ those parts of the Word to awaken and convert some member.

## **MINORITY REPORT**

Ad Hoc Committee to Study the Validity of Certain Baptisms

### **INTRODUCTION**

The evident desire and determination of all the members of the ad hoc Study Committee to draw a clear line of separation between truth and untruth, or be it, between orthodoxy and heterodoxy/heresy, is both proper and praiseworthy. Because there is no question among us as to the flagrant apostasy of the Roman Catholic church, consideration of R.C. baptism gives us a test case for the principle involved in discerning what constitutes a valid baptism. By extension, these principles can be used in other cases.

### **BRIEF HISTORICAL COMMENT**

A study of church history shows that a solid majority of Presbyterian churches and, almost without exception, all Reformed churches have held Roman Catholic baptism to be valid. Since the time of Thornwell, American Presbyterianism has largely tended to regard Roman Catholic baptism as invalid; prior to that time, however, most of American Presbyterianism was in harmony with other Reformed and Presbyterian bodies in this matter. The church has historically not rebaptized those who have fallen away from the faith, been excommunicated, and subsequently repented. Historically, the church has not required rebaptism for those who were baptized by ministers who subsequently proved to be apostate. More recently, the 1981 (159th) General Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod endorsed the validity of Roman Catholic baptism. In this, the Synod concurred with the vigorous and definitive dissent by Charles Hodge to the decision of the 1845 Assembly of the Presbyterian Church to declare Roman Catholic baptism invalid. (Hodge, "Validity of Romish Baptism" in Church Polity).

### **CONFESSIONAL AND BIBLICAL CONSIDERATIONS:**

Validity Versus Regularity of Propriety

As helpful as Church history may be on this issue, it is to the Scriptures and to our subordinate standards to which we should principally look for direction. When we consider Biblical and Confessional teachings, we must give careful attention to the distinction which is central to resolution of this issue: whether a baptism is irregular or improper (a matter of regularity or propriety) and the related question of whether the baptism was valid or efficacious. Confusion of these two matters has made more difficult the resolution of this baptismal controversy. Specifically, in order to establish that a certain baptism was invalid, it is not sufficient simply to demonstrate it to have been irregularly administered. For example, our Standards teach that a baptism administered by immersion is improper, yet valid. (WCF 28:3)

Consider the principles taught in Exodus 4:24-26, wherein God had started to kill Moses for his deliberate omission of the circumcising of his son. To prevent the Lord from slaying Moses, his wife Zipporah (a Midianitess) quickly administered the sacrament. This administration of circumcision was highly irregular, yet it was regarded by God as valid for immediately the Lord's wrath was turned away. In his Commentary on Exodus Calvin comments as follows:

Certainly the child was not duly (or regularly) circumcised; and still it is plain from the event, that the

ceremony thus rashly performed, pleased God; for nit is immediately added that 'He let hem go'.

If the highly irregular circumcision performed by the unordained, female Midianitess Zipporah was valid, how much more so, felt Calvin, are the less irregular baptisms performed by the ordained, male priests of the Church of Rome. Despite the highly irregular nature of Romish baptism, Roman Catholic.....children derive some benefit from baptism, when being engrafted into the body of the church, they are made an object of greater interest to the other members. Then, when they have grown up, they are thereby strongly urged to an earnest desire of serving God, Who has received them as sons by the formal symbol of adoption, before, from nonage, they were able to recognize Hem as their Father..." (Calvin, Institutes, IV:16)

#### THE SIGN VERSUS THE THING SIGNIFIED

An additional complication en clarifying the issues involved has been the lack of care, at times, to differentiate between the sign (outwardly applied) of the sacrament and the thing signified (inwardly effected); WCF 27:2. In Calvin's expression, the sacrament is one thing, the power of the sacrament is another. It is God Himself who sovereignly applies the inward grace promised en the observance of the sacrament whose outward sign is applied to the recipient by the administrator, en accordance with Divine command (Larger Catechism 163). Neither the piety nor the intention of the administrator of the sacrament have a bearing on the validity of the sacrament; its efficacy depends exclusively upon the work of the Holy Spirit (Westminster Confession of Faith 27:3; 28:6,7; LC 161, 164, 176, and Scripture cited therein.) Although there is an intimate connection between the human action and the divine grace, so that one is not separate from the other, a sharp distinction must be recognized so that one is never merged into the other.

#### THE COUNCIL OF TRENT AND THE QUESTION OF APOSTASY BY THE CHURCH OF ROME

It has been argued by some that Calvin. and other Reformers were viewing a Roman Catholic Church not yet "officially" apostatized, and therefore could countenance their baptism as valid, though highly irregular. Some argue that until the Council of Trent, the Church of Rome was not apostate. The Council of Trent met from 1545 to 1563. It defined the Roman Catholic position on the sacraments en 1547. This was well before the final edition of the Institutes en 1559. Prior to Trent, Calvin and the other Reformers were fully aware of the departure from the faith by the Roman Catholic Church. They certainly did not await the outcome of the Council of Trent before pronouncing the judgment of God upon that Church's apostasy. It is clear that they recognized, even as we should also, that Trent did not change the Roman Catholic doctrine of baptism. It is therefore instructive to note Calvin's comments on the parallelism between the apostate Church of Rome and the apostate Israel:

As in ancient times, there remained among the Jews special privileges of a Church, so in the present day we do not deny to the Papists those vestiges of a church which the Lord has allowed to remain among them amid the dissipation ... Such, then, is the certainty and constancy of the divine goodness, that the covenant of the Lord continued there (among the Israelites) and His faith could not be obliterated by their perfidy; nor could circumcision be so profaned by their impure hands as not still to be a true sign and sacrament of His covenant. Hence, children who were born to them the Lord called His own (Ezekiel 16:20), though, unless by special blessing, they en no respect belonged to Hem. So, having deposited His covenant en Gaul, Italy, Germany, Spain, and England, when these countries were oppressed by the tyranny of the (papal) Antichrist, He, in order that His covenant might remain inviolable, first preserved baptism there as an evidence of the covenant; baptism which, consecrated by His lips, retains its power en spite of human depravity." (Institutes, IV:2:11)

The priests and the people of Israel turned from serving the Lord unto idolatry and wantonness, so that the Lord removed Himself from them (Jeremiah; Ezekiel.) But God is true unto His own oath and His covenanted faithfulness is everlasting (Ezekiel 16:60ff).

## GOD'S FAITHFULNESS AND THE QUESTION OF THE WORTHY ADMINISTRATOR

It is on the grounds of God's faithfulness that Calvin affirms,

...Moreover, if we have rightly determined that a sacrament is not to be estimated by the hand of him by whom it is administered, but is to be received as from the hand of God Himself, from Whom it undoubtedly proceeded, we may hence infer that its dignity neither gains nor loses by the administrator... This confutes the error of the Donatists, who measured the efficacy and worth of the sacrament by the dignity of the minister. Such on the present day are our catabaptists (rebaptizers) who deny that we are duly baptized, because we were baptized in the Papacy by wicked men and idolaters; hence, they furiously insist on anabaptism (rebaptism). Against these absurdities we shall be sufficiently fortified if we reflect that by baptism we were initiated not into the name of any man, but into the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and, therefore, that baptism is not of man, but of God, by whomsoever it may have been administered. (Institutes, 1559 edition, IV: 15:16-17)

To say that Calvin regarded Roman Catholic baptism (or certain other baptisms) as valid is not to say that he thought such baptisms should have been administered or that they were proper baptisms. But it was his view that once administered, the baptism was valid and irrepeatable, even if highly irregular. This is also the position of Augustine who did battle with the Donatists. This sect tended to identify the invisible church (the elect) with the visible church (a mixed multitude); an imperfect church was no church at all; and the loss of personal perfection by a minister invalidated any sacraments administered by him. To the Donatists Augustine replied, "Baptism belongs to Christ, regardless of who may give (administer) it." (A. Pelikan, *The Christian 1. Tradition: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, Chicago, 1971, Vol. I, p. 311)

## THE CHURCH DETERMINES THE VALIDITY OR PROPRIETY OF BAPTISMS

Whereas God alone determines the efficacy (inward, spiritual grace) signified by the outward signs, it is the Church itself which must ministerially determine the validity and regularity or propriety of baptisms, in the same manner as it determines the validity (credibility) of professions of faith of those seeking membership in the Church. For, it was to the Church itself that Christ assigned the authority of the keys of the Kingdom and the responsibility of carrying out His Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). As the report of the 159th General Synod of the RPCES correctly observed, the church thus extends or withholds the sacraments in its declaratory and ministerial capacity as the God-appointed pillar and foundation of God's truth (1 Tim. 3:15). The Church ministerially declares administration of the sacraments to be valid (or, invalid) on the basis of the presence (or absence) of outward, discernible elements which constitute the criteria for validity (Larger Catechism 163). It is not, therefore, the prerogative of individuals within the church, nor of recipients of the sacrament to declare a baptism to be valid or invalid.

## CRITERIA OF VALIDITY AND CRITERIA OF REGULARITY

However helpful and informative it may be to consider historical instances in the Scriptures, it is principally to explicit, verbal instructions that we must look in order to establish Biblical criteria. As a confessional church, we seek guidance from the Confessional Standards as reliable summaries of that which the Scriptures teach. The following criteria are determinative of validity, and must therefore be present in the administration of baptism: (By their very nature, extraordinary cases are those which do not follow the rule, but our concern is to set forth which criteria are those which Scripture specifies).



1. Administered in the most Holy Name of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19; WCF 2:3). This formula may be expressed occasionally in the name of Christ Jesus as mediatorial representative of the Trinity (for example, Acts 2:38).
2. With water (Matt. 3:11; 28:19; John 1:33; 3:5; LC 177). It may be noted that application of oil as symbolic of the Spirit is exemplified in Scripture.
3. Unto those who profess faith in, and obedience unto, Christ; or unto children of those professing faith in Christ. (Gen. 17-7-9; Acts 2:31-39; 1 Cor. 7:14; LC 155; WCF 28:4, 14:1,2, and especially 14:3 with regard to the nature of the faith required.)
4. Administered by a lawfully ordained minister of the Gospel (WCF 27:4; 1 Cor. 4:1; 11:23; Heb. 5:4; Rom. 15:8.).

Besides these essential criteria which determine the validity of the baptism, other conditions should be met for the baptism to be regarded as proper or regular. Although not exhaustive, the following list include those elements which should be present in the administration of baptism for it to be regarded as regular or proper:

1. Within the bounds of a body bearing the marks of a true church of Jesus Christ. (Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 1:2; 12:12-13; Eph. 4:11-13)
2. By sprinkling or pouring. (Isaiah 52:15; Acts 2:17; Eph. 5:26; Hebrews 9:18,23; 10:22; 12:24; WCF 28:3)

#### THE BURDEN OF INVESTIGATING PREVIOUS BAPTISMS

A session which wishes to carry out its God-given responsibilities with sensitivity and conscientiousness may find the task of investigating previous baptisms a heavy and, at times, an impracticable one. As noted in the aforementioned report adopted by the 159th General Synod of the RPCES, "The process of investigation through the dim past, searching out such things as faith or the lack of it in deceased priest or parents, will convince one that only God knows the heart. Dr. Buswell wisely wrote ... 'The value of participation depends wholly upon its institution by Christ, and not in the slightest degree upon the human channel by which it is administered.' If we are not careful, none of us will know for sure if we have been baptized. Likewise, if our salvation rested on the quality of our faith rather than faith's perfect object, we could not truly know if we are saved ... God has not left us in such confusing positions. We can know we are saved and we can know we are baptized." Recognizing that the Church of Rome is no true Church, yet the RPCES report continued:

If a baptism comes from within a Christian tradition where the Trinity is understood and Jesus is accepted as the One Who came in the flesh and where He is designated the Savior, we urge acceptance of that baptism as valid. Thus, we reject outrightly the baptism of cults who stand outside the stream of catholic history. There is a distinct difference between contrived imitations and Roman distortions ... We express our firm outrage that so many of its (Roman Catholic) communicants have been taught to trust in the sacraments themselves and to give lip-service to the atoning sacrifice of the Savior. The truth of God has been slighted, but the enemy of God has not had a thorough victory.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Assembly receive both the Committee and the Minority Reports, commending them to the attention of its churches and lower courts as information.
2. That the Assembly leave decisions in these matters to be made, on a case by case basis, by the lower courts, subject to normal review and control or judicial processes.
3. That the Assembly discharge the Committee with thanks.

