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Appendix D

Infant Dedication and the Christian Reformed Church – Preliminary Report

As a result of an overture from Classis Alberta North to Synod 2007, the question of whether and how to handle the practice of infant dedication in the Christian Reformed Church was assigned to the Faith Formation Committee. Synod affirmed "the church's commitment to the practice of covenant baptism," noting that "the practice of infant dedication can never replace the beauty of the expression of God's covenant of grace communicated in the sacrament of baptizing infants," and that "the practice of baptizing infants is the normative practice prescribed by the Reformed confessions (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 74; Belgic Confession, Art. 34; and Church Order, Art. 56)." Synod discouraged "the practice of infant dedication" but also mandated "the Faith Formation Committee to provide biblical and pastoral guidance for councils who are conversing with those members who are requesting infant dedication in place of infant baptism," noting that "more than forty years have passed since synod last addressed infant baptism. We live in a different day than when synod last addressed these matters, and the churches would be well served by carefully considering together questions not previously raised surrounding infant dedication, as well as be provided with a fresh articulation of the practice of infant baptism" (*Acts of Synod 2007*, p. 659).

The following is a preliminary report on our work on this part of our mandate. We look forward to discussions of this material at Synod 2011 and anticipate presenting a more detailed and refined report for consideration at Synod 2012.

I. Historical and pastoral reflections

As we have studied both academic and pastoral resources on the subject of infant baptism and have received communications from pastors, elders, and members across the Christian Reformed Church, we take note of several recurring themes that inform our work on this subject.

A. *Multiple sources of requests for infant dedication*

- In one situation, a given town has only one Protestant church. Welcoming those with disparate views on infant baptism is agreed upon by all to be matter of Christian hospitality. It won't work to say, "If you want believer's baptism, then there is a church down the street," when, in fact, there isn't such a church down the street.
- In another situation, a new congregation or small congregation is eager to embrace every potential member—in part because it is struggling. Why bother fussing about infant baptism when survival is at stake?
- In yet another situation, one parent wants infant baptism, while the other parent wants believer's baptism. The parents might even compromise by baptizing some but not all of their children. Whatever else happens, the church wants to encourage these parents and ensure that the issue does not harm their marriage.
- In another case, a congregation has always practiced infant baptism, but a few years ago it reluctantly welcomed some members who do not agree. Despite this effort, the newer members still feel ambivalence. They feel like second-class citizens in the congregation. This leads the pastor and elders to identify inhospitable attitudes as the primary spiritual problem that needs to be addressed.
- In yet another case, the congregation and council of a congregation may be enthusiastic about infant baptism, but the pastor may have enough reservations to be more open to infant dedication than the congregation or council.

One reason that the CRC's past responses to the topic of requests for infant baptism do not seem sufficient is that they do not address these underlying contexts effectively. The committee agrees with synod's clear mandate that we affirm infant baptism and discourage infant dedication. The committee also believes that we need to reflect together on the underlying contextual challenges of ministry today.

B. *Notes on credobaptists and the Dutch Reformed tradition*

The committee has benefited by reviewing the history of credobaptism (believer's baptism; insisting on a profession of faith at baptism) and the Dutch Reformed tradition.

While it appears that believer's baptism emerged quite late in church history, not long after the Reformation there were baptistic influences in England and on the European continent, and the Dutch Reformed churches worked hard to fend off their impact. Church Order required the reading of the form for baptism each time children were baptized, and that included a clear explanation of the biblical rationale for baptism. The baptism questions to the parents and the prayers in the form also contained a strong defense of the practice. It appears that the Reformed churches have always felt the pressure of credobaptists.

However, while officially "detesting" Anabaptists in the Belgic Confession, a soft spot for baptists by those in the Dutch Reformed churches can be traced at least back to the seventeenth century, especially as that baptist movement progressed through England and Holland. Our spiritual forefathers shared an understandable attraction to baptist emphases such as

the necessity of personal repentance and faith, discipleship, and zeal for evangelism and missions. The popularity of the writings of John Bunyan, a Reformed Baptist, is a case in point.

Without actually converting to the baptist position, there were experiential pastors of the *Nadere Reformatie* (a period from about 1600-1750 that is often called the Dutch Second Reformation or the Further Reformation) like the prominent Rev. Joducus VanLodenstein, who wrestled with the meaning of infant baptism. Toward the end of his ministry, he changed the wording of a question (to parents) in the baptism form from “our children *are* sanctified in Christ” to “our children *will become* sanctified in Christ.” Messing with the approved forms could be a risky venture in those days.

The *Nadere Reformatie* emphasis on personal experience was rediscovered in the *Afscheiding of 1834* as believers read from the *Oude Schrijvers* (*Old Writers*) in their small group Bible studies. Some baptist tendencies tagged along on this spiritual renaissance, which also followed the church to the formation of the Christian Reformed Church in North America in 1857.

So it comes as no surprise that already in 1888, only 31 years after the denomination was founded here in the United States, there were questions in the church regarding the necessity of baptizing infants. When asked, synod responded unequivocally that year that parents who failed to present their children for baptism were to be “instructed and admonished patiently” and, that failing, were to be *disciplined*.

Synod’s act indicates how seriously as a Reformed church we took the doctrine. Denying baptism to a covenant child was paramount to violating his or her covenant rights. Efforts to restrain baptist tendencies in the denomination were bolstered over the years by an influx of Kuyperian immigrants who leaned toward the teaching of presumptive regeneration (based on the presumption that the covenant child is already regenerated or sanctified in Christ, and should thus be baptized).

While there has never been an explicit prohibition in the confessions or Church Order against infant dedication, it was always understood as a practical denial of infant baptism.

Due to our experiential DNA and the North American evangelical environment, however, the issue refused to disappear. Seventy-six years later, in 1964, the question again came to synod. This time synod significantly softened its stance by deciding that parent couples who did not want to baptize their children could be members in good standing as long as they were willing to be instructed and they promised not to propagate views in the church contrary to its official position. Synod 1973 went a step further when it determined that even adults who had themselves *rebaptized* could, at the discretion of their consistory, remain members of the church but would not be permitted to hold ecclesiastical office.

These decisions of the past generation opened the door to where we find ourselves today. Now we have many baptists who are members in good standing in the Christian Reformed Church. While many baptist members of the CRC have become convinced by the infant baptism position, others would still prefer to have their covenant children dedicated. While synod hoped it could maintain authority on the issue by having the parents promise not to propagate their views, the presence of unbaptized covenant children in our churches speaks volumes and is now demanding attention. It is

important to acknowledge that our official position can lead these members to feel a degree of ambivalence. On the one hand, they have been accepted as members in good standing for more than a generation, but, on the other hand, their decision to not baptize children is frowned upon. It is no small wonder there are some who are pleading their cause, others who are simply ignoring the official position of the church, and still others, like Classis Alberta North, asking for guidance.

Somehow the church needs to account for a situation it has itself fostered over the years, and at the same time the church must maintain the priority of the confessional position that promotes the blessedness of covenant theology.

C. *Multiple approaches to infant dedication, complex historical developments*

There are many different practices of infant dedication across the spectrum of Protestant churches. In churches that do not practice infant baptism, there is broad diversity in the practice of infant dedication, ranging from a ceremony that sounds and looks much like a “dry baptism” to a ceremony that distances itself from having anything directly to do with the children and, instead, dedicates the *parents* to instructing their children in the Lord. Some ceremonies implicitly refer back to Old Testament accounts of the dedication of Samuel; others make a point of resisting this comparison, noting that few parents feel comfortable making commitments on behalf of their children. Some ceremonies center on a celebration of birth; others focus on the commitment of the parents; others focus on prayers for the blessing of the children. Some include the laying on of hands over the parents, and some over the infants, and some not at all. There is no one theology of infant dedication.

D. *Changes in the landscape of Christian practice*

One mistake we must avoid is to think that this topic is basically unchanged, and that all we are doing is rehearsing arguments about this topic that have been going back and forth for nearly 1,700 years. While it is true that many of the core scriptural arguments do recur throughout church history, it is also important to note the following recent developments.

1. Greater mutual recognition—British Baptists are more likely than North American Baptists to recognize infant baptism. Reformed and Catholic Christians have been working toward greater mutual understanding and recognition of each other’s baptisms.
2. Resistance to mutual recognition—At the same time, there is in some places greater resistance to mutual recognition. Many people who grew up CRC but now are members in various believer’s baptism churches have had to be rebaptized in order to join those churches.
3. The rise of Baptist sacramentalism—Quite often the split between infant baptism and believer’s baptism congregations corresponded with a difference in symbolic understanding. Most churches who baptized infants thought of baptism as a sacrament; most believer’s baptism churches thought of baptism as a symbol. Today some churches that practice believer’s baptism are attempting to recover the language of *sacrament*.
4. The growth of Reformed Baptists and *covenantal* dedication—Large numbers of the recently identified “young, restless, and Reformed”

(New Calvinism) movement belong not to Reformed but rather to believer's baptism churches. Some of these congregations have developed rituals of "covenant dedication" that emphasize God's covenantal promises but refrain from using the term *baptism*.

5. The rise of *mixed practice* congregations—It is instructive that a recent volume titled *Baptism: Three Views* (IVP, 2009) includes a case for infant baptism, believer's baptism, and *mixed practice*—something that denominations like the Evangelical Covenant Church have practiced for some time.
6. Post-Christendom—Some of the most prominent critics of infant baptism in Europe were motivated by the demise of a genuinely baptismal spirituality in the contest of state churches and "Christendom" in Europe. Families presented infants for baptism, whether or not they had genuine faith, treating baptism as a superstitious ritual practiced simply because it was tradition.
7. Individualism and post-modern views of symbol—On the one hand, post-modernism has created a kind of "anything goes" approach to symbolism and a greater appreciation of how symbols are not merely received but can be invented (for example, "Can we make up a ritual that is somewhere between baptism and dedication?"). On the other hand, we find some congregations that embrace post-modern sensibilities in almost every way but remain rather firm in their views on baptism (usually "baptism is required").

All of this means that while many of the basic arguments for and against infant baptism are similar to those voiced by sixteenth-century Reformed and Anabaptist theologians, there are also many unique contextual dynamics to this conversation that do not remain static.

II. Renewed teaching about infant baptism

As our committee listens to conversations across the denomination, we have repeatedly heard both significant testimonies and renewed calls regarding effective teaching on covenant infant baptism.

The reasons for our commitment to infant baptism are not simply that "our confessions say so" or that "we do this because we belong to a CRC," but because we are convinced this practice is faithfully obedient to the Word of God. For this reason, we believe it is crucial that we strengthen each other for the ministry of patient teaching on this theme. When a family asks for infant dedication, two of the *least helpful* approaches are simply to accommodate their request without significant conversation and to hastily deny their request without opportunity for conversation. The most helpful approaches nearly always see the request as an opportunity to promote learning and growth, as congregational members gather around God's Word for instruction.

We have repeatedly heard accounts of people who once were reluctant to embrace infant baptism but later become enthusiastically grateful for it, because a pastor or elder or church education class took the time to patiently consider the Scriptures.

We have heard other accounts of how candid and constructive discussions within congregations are beneficial to proponents of each view: those who defend infant baptism can be grateful for the clear intention of credobaptists to challenge their children to state their own faith commitment; those who defend credobaptism can learn about the beauty of covenant promises.

To this end, it has been helpful for us to rehearse again the rationale for infant baptism and to glean from a number of resources that local congregations and pastors have provided regarding this teaching ministry. A number of these offer succinct biblically grounded replies to some of the most common objections to infant baptism. The following is a relatively brief, composite statement of these concerns, which may be helpful for use in a variety of pastoral settings.

III. Answering objections to infant baptism

A. Objection 1: The Bible says that faith comes first, then baptism

According to Mark 16:16, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (see also Acts 2:38-41; Gal. 3:26-29). This text suggests that faith comes first, then baptism. Infants should not be baptized until they grow up and come to faith. Paedobaptists wholeheartedly agree that those passages do indeed teach that adults should not be baptized until they come to faith, because baptism is for *believers* (and their children). Passages like this are speaking to and about adults, not covenant children. Of course, when it comes to adults, it is the one who believes and is baptized who will be saved. Whether or not you see a link between circumcision and baptism, to say that such texts exclude children would be like reading Romans 4:11 and concluding that children were not circumcised, or to assume that Jesus is not God based on his maintaining that “the Father is greater than I” (John 14:28). For adults who are saved, baptism follows faith. For the children of believers, faith follows baptism, though the relationship of trust and faith between a child and his or her covenant God should not be underestimated (see Ps. 22:9-10; 71:5-6).

B. Objection 2: There is no explicit command in Scripture to baptize babies

Sometimes there are no explicit proof texts for important doctrines in the Bible. For example, there is no one text that articulates the doctrine of the Trinity. We come to that doctrine by reading Scripture in its entirety and by piecing together the biblical evidence. So too with the doctrine of infant baptism. We study Scripture in its entirety and connect the dots. We recognize who is in the covenant and should receive the sign of the covenant, indicating their relationship with God in Christ. Scripture tells us that the covenant promises belong to believers and their children (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39). That covenant children have a relationship with God is indisputable (Ps. 22:9-10; 71:5-6). In fact, the children of a couple that includes just one believer are to be considered as holy (1 Cor. 7:14). Baptism is for those whose sins are washed away in Christ, the only way to have a relationship with God (Acts 22:16). If the Red Sea crossing is a symbol for baptism (1 Cor. 10:2), it would be impossible to imagine that the children would have been left on the beach to cross when they were old enough to make their own decision. It is also noteworthy that Jesus did not tell parents to wait to bring their little children (Mark 10:14-16) and babies (Luke 18:15) to him until they grow up. In fact,

he commands his disciples to permit the parents to bring them to him. If the circumcision/baptism link can be established, however (see below), the command to circumcise (Gen. 17:10) would be tantamount to an explicit command to baptize infants in the New Testament era.

C. Objection 3: There is no explicit example of a baby being baptized in the New Testament

The burden of proof for this argument falls back on those who deny infant baptism. There are three examples in Scripture of entire households being baptized: the households of Lydia (Acts 16:15), the Philippian jailer (16:33), and Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16). It is possible there were no children in any of those households, but if baptizing babies is wrong, you would think the New Testament writers would go out of their way to point out that there were no infants or young children in those households. Also, there is an interesting covenant principle occurring in household baptisms that supports the “believers and their children” notion of covenant inclusion found elsewhere in Scripture. Nothing is said about the faith of the other members of the household; only the faith of the head of the household is mentioned. In 1 Corinthians 10:2, in anticipation of baptism, it is said that *all* Israel was baptized as it crossed the Red Sea. The fact is, there is no example in Scripture of a child of baptized parents who had to be baptized later as an adult.

D. Objection 4: What if they grow up and are not believers?

It is possible that a baptized child could grow up and reject the faith in which he was raised. But is that a potential problem for infant baptism or for *all* baptisms? Does a profession of faith and baptism *guarantee* that a person will never backslide or even reject the faith? No. The fact that many who were baptized as adults get baptized more than once, if not frequently, indicates the opposite. And the likelihood of lasting faith probably lies within the context of the benefits a being raised in a covenant family. True faith is guaranteed only by the Spirit of God. And the fact remains that all believing parents are obligated to train their children in the way they should go (Deut. 6:4-7; Prov. 22:6).

E. Objection 5: Circumcision is merely an Old Testament Jewish-ethnic badge, not a precursor to baptism

The circumcision/baptism link can be severed only if one fails to read Scripture as a whole, within the context of the grand sweep of redemptive history and the unity of the one covenant of grace. To say that circumcision is merely a Jewish badge and has nothing to do with baptism is to miss the fact that the Jews were called to circumcise their *hearts* (Deut. 10:16) and that they are referred to in Scripture as the “church” in the wilderness (Acts 7:38, where the Greek text has *ecclesia*). In both the Old Testament and New Testament, promises are made to believers and their children (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39). The fact is that circumcision, like baptism, was never to be merely an external ethnic symbol but a sign and “a seal of the righteousness” that faith brings (Rom. 4:11). All of this comes together in Colossians 2:11-12, where Paul describes baptism as *the circumcision of Christ*. This is where it was all heading, as all those who belong to Christ are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promises (Gal. 3:27-29). When reading the Bible as a whole, one must also ask, Would God be less generous with his grace in the New

Testament than in the Old Testament by now excluding the children from the covenant (that is, from having a relationship with him)?

E. Objection 6: Baptizing babies presumes they are regenerate

There have been those who have appeared to “presume” the salvation of children who are baptized. This seems to be true in Roman Catholic circles and their *ex opera operato* view of the sacraments. Ideas of baptismal regeneration are likely what many Baptists fear when they see infants baptized. Indeed, there have been proponents of so-called “presumptive regeneration” among Reformed folk, though it would be difficult to imagine that this presumption meant not caring for the faith and nurture of their covenant children. Baptism, whether for children or adults, should never be about human *presumption* but about God’s *promises* and living in accord with those promises. The faith of adults who are baptized ought also not to be taken for granted but nurtured continually within the context of the faith community. Actually, many of those who reject infant baptism are among those who presume salvation; this occurs when the believer’s baptism position is accompanied by a doctrine of the universal salvation of those who die in infancy, which is nowhere taught in Scripture.

G. Objection 7: Baptism is a sign of faith, which babies cannot exercise

We have established that the relationship between God and covenant children is much closer than we can imagine (Ps. 22:9-10; 71:5-6; 1 Cor. 7:14). However, whether you see baptism first of all as a sign of something that a *person* is doing or a sign of what *God* is doing will make a difference in how you come out on this issue of whom should be baptized. If you see baptism first of all as a sign of a person’s faith, you cannot help but end up with believer’s baptism. You will have a radically different outcome if you understand baptism first of all as a sign of the washing away of sins in Christ—what God is doing. Even the oft-quoted baptism text of Romans 6, being buried and raised with Christ in baptism, is in the passive voice, meaning it is something that God has done. Salvation is first of all about what *God* is doing, and how we *respond* in faith. In this way infant baptism is a precious symbol of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God in *any* person’s salvation. “It was not I that found, O Savior true; no, I was found, was found of thee” (*Psalter Hymnal*, 498).

H. Objection 8: Believer’s baptism is a more emotional and memorable event for the candidate than infant baptism

If objections 1-7 have been biblically answered, to still choose for believer’s baptism, based on the desire for an emotional experience, would be questionable. No one remembers their birth, but most have successfully claimed that event as their own and its memory has become one of their most treasured days of the year. If receiving the sign of the covenant promise in infancy is right, the candidate will be reminded of this wonderful occasion in his or her life on a regular basis and, with every baptism that is witnessed, learn to claim the event as his or her own. Besides, how emotional and singularly memorable is an event when it is well known that many who hold to believer’s baptism are apt to experience it more than once? It would, however, be entirely legitimate to celebrate in memorable ways the event of one’s public profession of faith as it is grounded in the promise of one’s baptism.

The committee views this summary of responses as provisional, and it welcomes feedback about other common objections and other helpful pastoral responses.

IV. Additional pastoral responses

The Faith Formation Committee recognizes that a sufficient response to this topic will involve more than preaching and teaching. Even after patient and effective teaching on the subject, CRC councils still receive requests for infant dedication or for ministry with people who choose not to present their children for infant baptism. What kinds of pastoral responses are most appropriate?

The committee is grateful for—and stands in agreement with—synod’s prior decisions to discourage infant dedication ceremonies. Having two ritual actions (both baptism and infant dedication) can easily create confusion about the meaning of each, particularly when infant dedication itself can be understood in so many different ways.

We also have been grateful to hear testimonies from several congregations and pastors about thoughtful, pastoral responses to requests for infant dedication. In some congregations, the pastor and elders have scheduled a special home visit to celebrate the birth or adoption of a child, offer prayers of thanksgiving to God for the child, to pray for parents, and to listen to their concerns and commitments in the Lord. In some congregations, a special prayer of thanksgiving and welcome is offered for all newborn or newly adopted children in public worship independent of celebrations of infant baptism. Some congregations have taken special care to invite children who have not yet been baptized to profess their faith at a young age and receive baptism. We sense that these kinds of responses both honor the confessional commitments we hold as Reformed churches and respond in pastorally appropriate ways to members who do not present their children for baptism. We sense that these approaches are marked by conviction and hospitality as well as consistency and graciousness.

The committee is eager to hear from congregations about additional practices or suggestions along these lines, and we anticipate presenting a more complete document on this topic to Synod 2012.

Addendum

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