

THE SALTSHAKER

A PUBLICATION OF COVENANT REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

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How Do We Improve Our Baptism?

By Rev. Sean McCann

What a strange question! In our final article on the sacrament of baptism, I want to look at Westminster Larger Catechism Question 167: “How is our baptism to be improved by us?” If baptism is a singular act in which we are passive recipients, how can reformed theologians possibly talk about improving it?

The key to understanding this question lies in the word *improve*. While we typically define the word today as “to bring into a more desirable or excellent condition,” there is another definition, fallen out of use today, that defines *improve* as “to make good use of.” I am going to guess that most of you have never considered how to make good use of your baptism! If you’ve ever thought of your baptism, it has probably just been to remember the moment (or if an infant baptism, just the pictures of the moment) – you’ve rarely, if ever, thought of it as something to be used.

And if you’ve never given it much thought, then you are in good company, for that seems to have been the case in the church in the 17th century as well. The Catechism describes the making-good-use-of our baptism as a “needful but neglected duty.” Needful because of the spiritual good it can and does bring the Christian; neglected because so few Christians actively use their baptism. So how do we stop neglecting this grace and press on towards godliness? The Larger Catechism lays out five ways to improve our baptism, which I want to quickly review here, and then close by considering the two most opportune times to do so.

I. By meditating on the meaning of baptism. The cleansing waters of baptism signify the cleansing work of Jesus on the cross to wash away the guilt and condemnation of sin and present us before God in his perfect righteousness. With the application of water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God set you apart as a member of his covenant community. As members of his body – the church – we have access to the rich blessings of God in Christ, and are also held respon-

sible to repent and believe the gospel. Therefore the first – and primary – way that we make good use of our baptism is to believe the promises that it signifies and trust Jesus alone for salvation. Just as the newly adopted child must believe that these two new strangers are actually parents who will unconditionally love them forever, so too must we believe all that God promises in the gospel.

II. By confessing our sins against the covenant God of our baptism. Baptism marks the Christian as an heir to all the riches of God, “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it” (Eph 1:13-14). Because we know how truly undeserving we are, this glorious truth should humble us, as well as sober us to the responsibilities of such an inheritance. In other words, as baptized Christians our sins are compounded and made all the worse in that they run contrary to the very grace extended in baptism. It is the difference between a thief breaking in and stealing cash from Dad’s wallet, and a teenage son who receives a generous allowance doing the same thing. Baptism compounds our guilt, but as we will see next, it also compounds our assurance of forgiveness.

III. By growing up to assurance of pardon, which is sealed in baptism. Baptism is the seal of the king that guarantees the authenticity of our royal pardon. In the gospel we are pardoned of all our transgressions and washed clean by the blood of Christ. The gospel message declares this glorious truth to us, and when our hearts fail to believe it, we can run our fingers over the royal seal and be reassured. Baptism is that tangible seal of pardon, and we use it when we look to it as an object of assurance. We would do well to not file the royal pardon in the back of a drawer in the attic, but to frame it for all to see and read it daily in order to grow in our identity as a child of God.

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May–June

Upcoming Events

For more information about any of these events, refer to our website (www.covenantreformed.net), or the church office (828-253-6578; crpchq@gmail.com).

The Lord’s Supper

Please prepare your hearts in advance to take of the sacrament together.

During Morning Worship: May 5 and 19 June 2 and 16	During Evening Worship: June 30
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Shepherding Groups:

May 5, following morning worship.

Evensong:

May 5, 6 p.m. at the McCanns’ home.

Fellowship Meal:

June 2, following morning worship.

Veterans’ Restoration Quarters Meals:

Lunch: May 1, June 5
Dinner: May 16, June 20

Weekly Events

Sunday:		
Opening Exercises	9:30 am	
Sunday School	9:45 am	
Morning Worship	11:00 am	
Evening Worship	6:00 pm	Except for 1st Sundays

Wednesday Evenings:		
Supper	6:00 pm	In May
Bible Study/Prayer	6:45 pm	In May
Home Prayer Groups	6:00 pm	In June

Bible Study

For Men:		
Men’s Prayer Breakfast	8:00 am	2nd & 4th Saturdays
ROMEOS	8:00 am	Every Thursday
<i>(Retired Old Men Eating Out)</i>		
at J&S Cafeteria, River Ridge		
Norm Bomer’s Home	7:00 pm	1st & 3rd Thursdays

For Women:		
Carol Belz’s Home	9:30 am	Every Tuesday
Fellowship Hall	10:30 am	Every Wednesday
Debbie Cate’s Home	7:00 pm	1st & 3rd Thursdays

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IV. By drawing strength from Christ, into whom we were baptized. The Apostle Paul describes the Christian life as a fight and a race (2 Tim 3:7). Both of these metaphors imply struggle, exhaustion, and perseverance. But we are not left alone in the fight of faith; rather we are nurtured and strengthened by Christ to put off sin and to put on righteousness. Forgive the graphic imagery, but we understand this point by imagining baptism as symbolic of the umbilical cord that unites a baby to the life-giving nutrients that flow from the mother. Or to use the Biblical image, we are the branch that draws strength from the vine (Jn 15). And our union in this vine – our union in Christ – has been sealed and signified by the waters of baptism.

V. By endeavoring to live by faith and walk in the newness of life shown forth in baptism. With the arrival of the summer months my kids will spend many evenings getting dirty by running around outside, and playing in the creek. Inevitably, they will take a bath, put on their PJs, and then beg to go back outside for just a few more minutes! On those few evenings when we comply, we will be sure to instruct them to be careful not to get dirty again. And this is the charge of baptism. Paul argues in Romans 6 that because we have been baptized into Christ Jesus (v3), “so you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (v11). In a sense then, our baptism is something we “live up to”: it is a family name that we carry with honor, it is a military uniform that we wear with pride, it is a cleansed body that we are careful not to dirty again in the muck of sin.

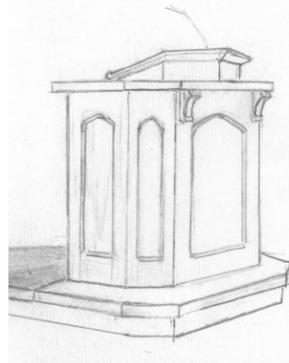
Now that we’ve identified *how* to improve our baptism, we will close considering *when* we should pursue this duty. First, we are to improve our baptism when we observe others being baptized. These moments in the worship of the church remind us to look back at our own baptism and work through these five ways of renewing our walk with God. Take this time to repent of your sins against your covenant with God, to stir up your faith, and to reflect on the gracious promises made in the covenant of grace. Christian, make good use of these services, not just to smile at cute babies, but also to strengthen and deepen your faith.

Second, we must seek to use our baptism in times of temptation. According to Michael Horton, “Martin Luther was fond of saying that whenever the devil either tempted him to sin or filled him with fear of damnation he would cry out, ‘Away with you, for I am baptized!’” Christian, Jesus has claimed you as his own, and no one can snatch you out of his hand. Lean on your baptism, and may it be of great help when you face temptation.

Your baptism is one of the most important events in your life, so let us grow together in Christ as we diligently and joyfully seek to improve our baptism.

The Sacred Desk

By Rev. Sean McCann



This month we will conclude our series through Acts that I began one year ago on the first Sunday of May, 2018. It has been a joy over this year to meditate on how nothing can stop King Jesus as he spreads his gospel, by his Spirit, through the witness of his church, to the very ends of the earth. Now that Paul has finally arrived in Rome, we are going to change focus from the acts of these apostles, to their beliefs, and we’re going to do that through a sermon series on the Apostles’ Creed. The Apostles’ Creed – while not actually written by any apostles – stands above the other great historic creeds of the church as an ecumenical symbol of faith that summarizes the apostolic teaching and unites the global church. Every Christian and denomination believes *more* than what is found in this Creed, but no one believes *less* than the doctrine found here.

Throughout the history of the church, the Apostles’ Creed has been joined together with the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer to form the three-legged stool of the Christian faith. I have previously preached on the Lord’s Prayer (Summer of 2016) and the Ten Commandments (Summer of 2017), so I am eager to complete the set this summer with the Creed. The Heidelberg Catechism – used by our sister churches in the Dutch Reformed tradition – is similar to our own Westminster Shorter Catechism in how it explains both the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer in detail, but it goes beyond Westminster by adding a section on the Creed. This section has been most helpful to me as I have prepared for this series, especially Question 24: “How are these articles divided?” Answer: “Into three parts; the first is God the Father, and our creation; the second of God the Son, and our redemption; the third of God the Holy Ghost, and our sanctification.”

To supplement this sermon series, our Summer Home Prayer Groups will be discussing the Creed on Wednesday evenings by following along with the summaries and questions in J.I. Packer’s book, *Affirming the Apostles’ Creed*. We’ve also included the full preaching schedule in the side column and would encourage you to being to pray for God’s word to bear fruit in our hearts and minds during this summer series.

Preaching Schedule	
Date	Sermon Titles
June 2	The Almighty Father
June 9	The Almighty Creator
June 16	The Divine Son
June 23	The Human Son
June 30	The Son Descended
July 7	The Son Resurrected
July 14	The Son Ascended
July 21	The Son Will Return
July 28	The Holy Spirit
August 4	The Spirit Gathers
August 11	The Spirit Revives
August 18	The Spirit Assures
August 25	The Spirit Comforts

Young Adult Sunday School

By Rev. Chris Brown

Every member of this Church is in a different “phase of life”, with differing difficulties and joys. We benefit when we relate to one another: the elderly being cheered by the strength and zeal of youth for Jesus Christ, the youth being tempered by the wisdom of the old, the elderly imparting wisdom to young adults and middle-aged, and those former groups providing pastoral care for the aged. We all benefit from the overlap of different age groups in our various ministries. But at times there is also room for specialized focus on a specific age group. I was over at a friend’s house the other day, and saw that he had set up a trellis behind some of his raspberry plants. The raspberries themselves were barely peeping out of the ground, and so I asked him what was the point of setting up a trellis now. He said, “They grow into bushes so big that their branches eventually just need to lean on something, or they will fall over.” But, as I glanced around his garden, I noticed that many of the plants didn’t require a trellis. Instead, each type of plant, and each plant in a different stage of growth, required specialized care and attention.

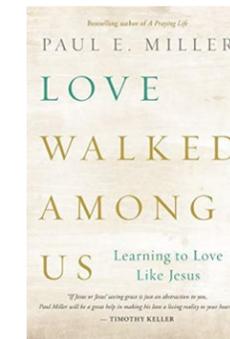
Imagine, for a moment, that each “age group” in this Church is like a different type of plant. Each type of fruit or veggie demands a different type of care, but not a permanent type of care. Every member grows from their union with Jesus, who explains, “*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Abide in me, and I in you...As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.*” (John 15:1, 4). But, as children become youth or teens, we talk to them differently. We give them more responsibilities, and challenge them to grow in a new way. As youth become young adults, we have different expectations of them, and provide different education for them. And so on and so on with each age group.

Our young adults are much like that raspberry bush. Right now there are a handful of us, and we’re only beginning to press our shoots out of the earth. But we pray, and expect, that eventually there will be some large, tangled, somewhat unmanageable bushes. If we don’t supply a trellis of education now, then young adults will not be trained to rest upon it when it becomes absolutely critical.

For this reason, the Session has determined it is wise to teach a one-quarter Sunday school class for young adults, post-High-School to 40 years of age. It will meet on Sundays this summer (June-August) during the Sunday school hour. A temporary class could promote a sense of place and development of friendship among young adults, provide special teaching on topics particularly suitable to people in this stage of life, offer biblical teaching that is shaped towards newly Reformed or non-Reformed persons who are attending or new members, and even train future leaders of the congregation and denomination. More details to follow!

Love Walked Among Us

By Rev. Chris Brown



It is startling how many poor studies there are of the life of Jesus. One man once said that when historical-critical scholars began a quest for the ‘historical Jesus’, detached from faith in the Scriptures, “they looked down the well of history and they saw their own faces gazing back at them.” When we study the life of Jesus, we have to approach the Scriptures that tell us about Jesus with faith, or else we will only find things in Him that

we admire about ourselves. He will become, “The Jesus that loves culture”, or “The Jesus of the Zealot party” (as one recent book claims). We need good studies and reviews of the earthly ministry of Jesus that are based in faith in the Word of the Living God.

Our current Sunday school class on Christian Love is loosely based on Paul E. Miller’s “Love Walked Among Us: Learning to Love Like Jesus”. In this book, Miller points his readers to Jesus’ perfect example of love, as seen in His earthly ministry. This is an excellent study of the life of Jesus because it is marked by sincere faith in the authenticity of the writings about Jesus’ earthly ministry. Instead of confirming only what Miller wishes to promote about himself in Jesus’ life, the author genuinely examines the ministry of Jesus. After such a study, Miller comes away challenged and changed by Jesus, and wishes to share what he has learned.

Miller writes to be both instructive to the mature believer, as well as to convict and convince the unconverted. His study of the love of Jesus follows His example of compassion, His truth-telling, His dependence on God, His faith in His Father, and His Self-giving death. Miller purposefully aims for this book to end on the necessity of faith in Jesus as God-become-man to save us from our sins. My only criticism of the book is in Miller’s ordering, however it is also somewhat understandable. If an unconverted person reads this book, they begin by seeing how very unloving they have been in comparison with Jesus. They aren’t offered the gospel precisely until the concluding section of the book. Miller is making an apologetic argument that holds up the law of love, and instills guilt for lovelessness. He then offers the Jesus who loves us to the end, and grants forgiveness of sins by faith in Him. But for mature believers, this explanation of the gospel could be appropriately placed at the beginning, showing that we work to imitate Jesus out of faith in Jesus’ loving sacrifice. Despite that nuanced critique, this book is overall a great resource: accurate, persuasive, convicting, and encouraging to all who seek the truth about Jesus.