

The Life and Work of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa: The Doctrinal Dimension of Baptism

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Abstract

A perduring theological and practical problem of the universal church relates to the doctrine of baptism. This article investigates hermeneutical and historical issues in relation to what it means to be a member of Christ's church and the implications thereof in the specific context of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (PCSA). The debate has arisen in relation to the options of infant and believer's baptism, or believer's baptism. Within Christian denominations there are often conflicts regarding exclusive and inclusive policies. While the PCSA followed the main trend of the sixteenth century Reformation churches, there is disagreement among some of its members on various points. The article is based primarily on a literature review of primary sources. It is structured in terms of its origin, history, and external influences, namely: the charismatic renewal; the sacrament of Holy Communion and rebaptism; the covenant and baptism; and the South African context.

Keywords: believer's baptism; infant baptism; inclusive; Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa

UNISA
UNIVERSITY
OF SOUTHERN AFRICA
PRESS

Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae

Volume 50 | Number 1 | 2024 | #15662 | 16 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/15662>

ISSN 2412-4265 (Online), ISSN 1017-0499 (Print)

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Background

The discussion of baptism within the context of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (PCSA)¹ shows how external influences can exercise a destabilising influence on the internal theological position of a denomination as ministers are exposed to influences, like the charismatic movement, and accommodate it to their newly found opinions which depart from their ordination vows. A number of primary sources (PCSA documents) and secondary sources, relevant to the period during which PCSA studies on baptism were carried out, are employed to discuss the issue of baptism in the PCSA context. Though primarily an article in the field of Historical and Systematic Theology, it also involves the disciplines of Church Polity, Practical Theology, Systematic Theology, Missiology and Biblical Studies as it concerns not only the beliefs of the church but also its practices.

Introduction

All the Churches regard baptism as a regular and unquestionable part of the life of the Church. (Baillie 1957, 72)

While baptism is evident from the time of Jesus' ministry, it is difficult to ascertain absolutely whether or not this included infants. Yet, "we need have no doubt that wherever Christians baptised little children they would have assumed that they were continuing Apostolic practice" (Beasley-Murray 1962, 306). Baillie (1957, 75) argues that "baptism goes back not only to the very beginning of the Christian Church but 'to the mind and message of Jesus himself'". What is known, however, is that infant baptism became part of the history and tradition of the Church from an early time (Jongeleen 1985, 1–3; cf. Beasley-Murray 1962, 306–307). Regarding infant baptism in the New Testament, Williams (1957, 30) comments: "They probably were included on the strength of the idea of inherited holiness in 1Cor 7:14". More recently, challenges have emerged with regard to infant baptism, even within churches, on various interpretations of scripture often stimulated by the rise, inter alia, of the charismatic movement from the late 1960s. Here the experiential dimension of the sacrament of baptism has come to the fore to challenge the often indiscriminate use of baptism devoid of any disciplinary aspect to safe guard its integrity.

History, Theology and Practice of Baptism in the PCSA

The first mention of baptism, beyond the New Testament period, that is relevant for the PCSA is found in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381CE (UPCSA 2007, 2–3) one of the historic creeds of the universal Church. It was simply and straightforwardly "for the remission of sins". This creed remains one of the historic creeds of the Church. The sixteenth century Reformation reduced the number of sacraments from seven to

1 In 1999, the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (former mission church) and the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa united to form the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa.

two – baptism and holy communion – and the idea of the remission of sins was retained for baptism in the *Scottish Confession of Faith* (1560 in Cochrane 1966, 179–182): “... we believe that by Baptism we are engrafted into Christ, to be made partakers of His righteousness, by which our sins are covered and remitted”. They are celebrated by “lawful [i.e. ordained] ministers” (Cochrane 1966, 181). Calvin (1559, IV.15.692–703) challenged the Anabaptists of his day by vociferously defending infant baptism as:

an affirmation of continuity with the Catholic church, an affirmation of the church as a covenant community in which grace precedes individual faith, and an insistence on the need for the church to remain an institution at the centre of the public arena in order to Christianise it. (De Gruchy 1991, 198)

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Westminster Divines 1646, XXVIII:31) expands the definition to include “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 into Christ through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life”. Infant baptism is permitted (Westminster Divines 1646, XXVIII.4). All of these documents from 1560 mention incorporation as the means of entry into the membership of the Church. There are no alternative means of entry into the fellowship of Christ’s followers. *The Declaration of Faith for the Church in Southern Africa* (1973, 1993, 1994) makes no mention of either of the sacraments as it fulfilled a different purpose, namely: “to express the Christian response to ... racial discrimination and segregation and the ideology that underpinned this” (UPCSA 2007, 2.5: 35). Hence, there are no direct credal statements regarding baptism. The PCSA followed other Reformed churches and did not deviate from their standards regarding baptism either historically or contemporaneously.

The Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa

In 1838, in Cape Town, a mission was established for former slaves. The first members admitted by baptism were adults (Quinn and Cuthbertson 1979, 15, 17). There is no clear evidence that infant baptism was practised but mission schools were set up and catechism classes were held (Quinn and Cuthbertson 1979, 25–26). Through their historical adherence to the Church of Scotland (1958), they followed its form of worship and practices which included infant baptism. This was almost certainly the universal practice.

Following the formation of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa in 1897, *The Book of Order* was published in 1909. In it there is the following comment: “Membership of this Church is based on an intelligent profession of faith in Christ, sustained by a life consistent therewith” (PCSA 1909, 3). While baptism is not mentioned, it can be assumed that this referred to adult believers who had professed their faith on admission to the sacrament of holy communion. A *Service Book and Ordinal* was published in 1928 although there was no thought of either superseding or discouraging the use of the *Westminster Directory for Public Worship*. The *Service Book and Ordinal* contains orders for both infant and adult baptism, probably reflecting general practice at the time

of the 1987 union. Interestingly, there are no prescribed vows to be taken by the parents, and in between the services for infants and adults there is an insertion, *An Alternative Form of Address before Baptism* (PCSA 1982, 66–67), which seems to suggest an alternative to baptism in the form of dedication and consecration – which did not have the warrant of Presbyterian practice. It originated in an address given by Prof P. Carnegie Simpson in 1918 but its rationale is unclear. The 1955 *Book of Order* is explicit regarding baptism:

A member in full communion has the right to have his minor children baptised on reiterating his profession of faith and solemnly undertaking to bring up such baptised children among its members and they become members in full communion when admitted by a Kirk Session ... (PCSA 1955, 3)

People might wonder why there needed to be a service for the Confirmation of Baptismal vows and Admission to Full Communion (PCSA 1982, 72–76) if full membership was attained by baptism? This question has presented a perennial problem in many churches, particularly surrounding the use of the word “confirmation” relative to the question “What is being confirmed?” as if God’s action, through the action of the Spirit in the baptism of infants, is somewhat deficient.

The Manual of Law, Practice and Procedure of the PCSA enjoins ministers to preach “at least once a year on baptism on the meaning, power and necessity of baptism” in order “to promote a right understanding of Holy Baptism in the Church” (PCSA 1971b, 92). Baptism would take place after instruction. In the case of infants, the parents would receive teaching on the sacrament. The emphasis was on the baptism of infants. The concentration on the instruction of parents effected a balance between the inability of infants to give consent to the vows taken and the responsibility of parents to nurture their children in the faith with the support of the local congregation. Its public nature was stressed as were the means – “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, with water”. The sacrament was to be celebrated by a minister. The options of immersion, sprinkling or pouring were specified. The final comment was most important: “Baptised persons, whether children or adults, are members of the Holy Catholic church” (PCSA 1971b, 92). The PCSA policy on baptism was inclusive. These emphases might suggest that there was a need to be specific in a context where infant baptism was beginning to be challenged in a context where experiential forms of faith expression were becoming common.

External Influences: Charismatic Renewal

From then on, South African Christianity was being exposed to the influence of the Charismatic renewal of the late 1960s until the mid-1970s. Mathole (2005, 179) indicates that: “It evolved according to the racial path set by the racial segregation scenario of South Africa”. Therefore, it became a movement which at the time did not seem to be challenging the oppressive regime of the day. Politically, it sat on the fence pushing the spiritual agenda of the Charismatic movement in a manner that did not

engage it in the struggle against injustice. It tended to focus on individual rather than corporate blessing and impacted on numerous mainline churches, including the Presbyterians. As a result, the emphasis was on the baptism of individuals rather than on their baptism as a sign of incorporation into a community of the faithful.

Rebaptism and the Sacrament of Holy Communion

The 1975 General Assembly heard that: “A new gap has been brought to our attention – viz. the problems relating to Baptism and re-Baptism and whether children who are not yet confirmed should be allowed to partake of the Sacrament of Communion” (PCSA 1975, 25).

These were indeed serious questions for reflection and consideration as they have arisen in “many churches throughout the world” (PCSA 1975, 28). Beasley-Murray (1962, 308) gives an example of the Tübingen faculty of theology in the 1950s stating that

clerics who taught, administered, or even regarded as possible “rebaptism: ... ought not to remain in office, and that members who had submitted to it and refused to admit that they had thereby been guilty of heresy should no longer be regarded as members of the Evangelical Church.

The strong condemnation, relating to the rebaptism of those already baptised in infancy, was given in the awareness that there was no definitive scriptural proof for infant baptism. However, the weight of tradition, even in the Reformed tradition, was overwhelming. The issue of children participating in communion fell under scrutiny in the PCSA as it was difficult to reconcile baptised infants being members of the church, yet being denied access to the other sacrament with its focus on corporate unity. The main argument was that children cannot understand the meaning of the sacrament – which is described as a mystery – even when adults are involved. However, intellectual understanding is not the only, and may not be the best, way to deal with mystery. This is a spiritual and affective matter. It has been understood for many years that children’s capacity for awe and wonder is developed much earlier than their intellectual or rational capacity. Schein (2014, 78) refers to:

The spiritual development as a system of children’s deep connections leading first to self-awareness, and later to the nurturing of basic and complex dispositions ignited by moments of wonderment, awe, joy, and inner peace that develop into the prosocial personality traits of caring, kindness, empathy, and reverence.

Many matters of faith are not subject to intellectual comprehension; yet they are real to people’s experience within a faith context and it appears from later developments that it was not only children who had such experiences as is witnessed to within the charismatic and Pentecostal movements.

It was noted that the issue of re-baptism was an outcome of the charismatic movement (PCSA 1975, 28) which had infiltrated many churches. The 1975 General Assembly decided that, while it was a matter for parents to decide on the timing of their children's baptism, "it commends to parents the ancient practice of Infant Baptism". It also reaffirmed its prohibition of re-baptism as "contrary to Scripture, the Confessions of the Church and the Reformers' teaching" (PCSA 1975, 49). It granted permission for children to be admitted to communion pending the decision of the Session but did not specify if these children had to be baptised. It did specify that

children of the Covenant need to be involved not only in the words and statements of the faith but should also experience the activity of the faith in the symbols and various other forms of association with others in the body. (PCSA 1975, 30)

Heron (1961, 33– 34), following Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin (Gonzales 1975, 83) along with Baillie (1957, 83) draws a strong analogy between circumcision and infant baptism:

The fact that a Hebrew boy was circumcised when he was only one week old showed that his entrance into the covenant was not conditional on anything that he had done, but solely upon the providential ordering of his life by God, who had caused him to be born of belonging to his Holy people ... God's election came before ... there is any possibility of man's response.

As with the Bar Mitzvah of the Jewish faith, great stress was laid on teaching regarding the sacrament of baptism (PCSA 1975, 50). The General Assembly took cognisance that: "In many of the African Cultural Traditions it would be quite unthinkable" (PCSA 1975, 31) for children to partake of communion due to their strong emphasis on serious preparation for "confirmation", and noted that in white congregations the norm had been that admission to the sacrament of communion was withheld until young persons had made their profession of faith.

The charismatic renewal was only one of the influences which affected the way that Presbyterians began to review the whole idea of membership of the Church. The General Assembly heard a number of other causes:

- the emergence of a novel form of congregationalism or individualism;
- a desire for acknowledgment of an experience in mature years following infant baptism;
- the increase of ministerial candidates and members unfamiliar with the ethos of the Reformed tradition;
- the dissolution of Christendom and "cultural" Christianity and its assumptions;
- theological challenges from evangelical and pietistic interpretations of the gospel leading to undermining the sacraments; and
- the rise of ideas of the sacraments as "testimonies to human decision and personal faith" (PCSA 1983, 56) rather than as an act of a gracious God in His mercy towards

his people: “The action of God, which is the essential thing in the sacrament, is complete even in the Baptism of an infant” (Heron 1961, 44).

Four responses developed, namely: maintenance of the historical tradition of paedobaptism (Calvin 1559, 703ff; IV. xvi.1–32); a desire for a deeper biblical theology of the sacraments; a greater demand for believer’s baptism, or even second baptism; and a rejection of infant baptism (PCSA 1983, 56). The idea of second baptism was described as “latent Pelagianism where the salvation of the Lord needs to be supplemented by an act of man” (PCSA 1983, 58; cf. Lohse 1963, 117–122) and was rejected. Instead, guidance was offered in terms of church law with the ultimate sanction of resignation or deposition for ministers (PCSA 1985, 235). One question that does not appear to have been given serious consideration relates to whether or not there were any ways of recognising a dramatic experience other than rebaptism.

Here, the issue of baptism in the Spirit was raised as an alternative to infant baptism as if it was something different. John the Baptist made it clear that “he [Jesus] will baptise you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8); then, “just as he [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him” (Mark 1:10). Jesus’ baptism was baptism in the Spirit and so on afterwards for “it is the Spirit that effects through the sacrament what it symbolises ... Indeed, what Christian baptism symbolises” is baptism in the Spirit as that which unites those baptised with Christ and His body on earth (PCSA 1996, 289). Therefore, if people talk about having received a subsequent “baptism in the Spirit”, then no further recognition is required. This is a sufficiently dramatic experience to merit no further human intervention following the Spirit’s activity and rebaptism becomes irrelevant. However, the idea was rejected by the PCSA (1997, 353) for spiritual unity is God’s intention in baptism.

The idea of a service of blessing or dedication for infants was rejected. Ultimately, the Committee on Church membership concluded that:

The fundamental matter at this present time is not a decision for or against a particular form of baptism, or even a particular theology of baptism, but the question of the state and condition of the life of the Church into which people are baptised. Will the Church take seriously the call to Renewal in and through the Holy Spirit so that a Pentecostal life and dynamism may lead to those quality characteristics found in the early Church and set forth in Acts 2:42–47? (PCSA 1985, 62)

It emerged in 1985 (PCSA 1985, 52) that a number of PCSA ministers had come under the influence of the Rhema Church and guidance was offered to the denomination due to its emphases on:

- (a) experiences that supplement Scripture and so undermine its authority;
- (b) doctrinal heresy;
- (c) cheap conversion;
- (d) a god whom believers can manipulate; and

(e) religious justification for selfishness, self-centredness and the covetous materialism of our capitalist society. (PCSA 1985, 63)

This had caused the Convener, Rev. C Jongeleen, of the ad hoc Committee on Doctrine to prepare a paper which was integrated into its report. This was later published as a document for the denomination's interest in 1985.

Infant Baptism

Jongeleen (1985, 1) offers a careful and detailed study noting that the silence of the New Testament on infant baptism is “really inconclusive”. His argument in favour of membership in the *oikos* (household) combined with the argument of corporate personality in the Jewish and early Christian community, linked to a detailed study of the Church Fathers, indicates that there was an early tradition of infant baptism and this is supported by Calvin (1559, IV.xvi.8): “there is no writer, however ancient, who does not regard its origin in the apostolic age as a certainty”. The argument from silence could also be interpreted as evidence of the universal practice of infant baptism which required no further comment or discussion. Origen (in Beasley-Murray 1962, 306; cf. Baillie 1957, 76) maintains that: “The Church has received a tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to little children”. Beasley-Murray (1962, 352, emphasis in original) suggests that in the light of this, it is possible that: “*Infant baptism originated in a capitulation to pressures exerted upon the Church both from without and within*” (cf. Baillie 1957, 76, emphasis in original). However, the lack of direct evidence is also problematic.

Like many of those who oppose infant baptism, Beasley-Murray (1962, 358–359) sums up the situation in the New Testament and early Church:

The New Testament gives no evidence that infant baptism was practised in the primitive Church; its theology of baptism is lofty, with no taint of magical conceptions, and it does not allow of application to the baptism of infants. In the succeeding century the doctrine of baptism was considerably modified in the direction of a lowered externalised sacramentalism; this theology is capable of being applied to the baptism of infants, since the emphasis falls on the efficacy of the rites and the materials used; by the close of the period infant baptism appears to be established. The suggestion lies to hand that the modified views made possible the application of the rite to infants, and when once the rite began to be applied in this manner, the process of externalising the mode of its operation became accelerated.

Jongeleen (1985, 4) then goes on to discuss the covenant of grace “through the centuries” based on Colossians 2:11–12, drawing a parallel between circumcision and baptism. So, “the essence of baptism is to be admitted into God’s covenant of grace” (Jongeleen 1985, 5). He quotes Flemington (1957, 131):

... it is probably true in regard to infant baptism, as it was of Christian baptism generally, that the determinative influence came from the side of Judaism. It was as natural to

regard children as included within the new covenant as it had been to regard them as included within the old covenant. If we give due weight to this analogy, it becomes easier to understand why there seems to have been no early pronouncement on the question. Among those whose religion was grounded in the Bible there was no need for any “authorisation” of infant baptism.

So, the argument from silence is based in the universal practice of the baptism of infants. A further argument is that proselyte baptism had included infants during Jesus’ life. Baptism then acknowledges that God has conferred grace in the gospel. The degree of faith on the part of the recipient of baptism was neither a requirement nor a condition in other instances of receiving God’s blessing: ‘It is not faith in the child, but *the faith surrounding the child* that is decisive’ (Jongeleen 1985, 7, emphasis in original) within the covenant: “God’s grace does not wait for certain conditions to be filled first” (Jongeleen 1985, 8); “*God’s initiative precedes our faith; our faith follows*” (Baillie 1957, 89, emphasis in original).

The issue for the PCSA, as stated by Jongeleen (1985, 9f), was the existence of “aberrations” which detracted from the significance of the sacrament. Rebaptism arose out of a need to have a special event to mark a dramatic experience which makes the experience the subjective basis for the sacrament. This lacuna could have been resolved, for instance, by the person who had the dramatic experience giving a testimony to their experience. For instance, when Paul had his conversion experience, Ananias laid his hands on him; he received the Holy Spirit; and he was subsequently baptised (Acts 9:17–19; 22:12–16). There is a differentiation here between an act of God and a human act which is the origin of a desire for rebaptism. This act negates God’s authority and promises. It goes as far back as Augustine of Hippo: “If you give another baptism, you give another faith; if you give another faith, you give another Christ; if you give another Christ, you give another God” (Augustine *De Schis. Donat* 5.3 in Gonzales 1971, 52).

The idea of replacing baptism with a dedication of children has no scriptural warrant. The only choice that exists for parents is either infant or believer’s baptism (Jongeleen 1985, 10). The idea of performing dramatic rites for the reaffirmation of baptismal vows, possibly combined with immersion in water is unnecessary when a service is available for confirmation of baptism by the profession of faith and admission to the Lord’s Table. The same is true of baptism by immersion. There is no definitive evidence for baptism by total immersion (Jongeleen 1985, 10–11). Rohr (2019, 10) refers to:

Evangelicals who “received Jesus into their hearts” but still felt the need to “get saved” again every Friday night. Did they not believe that a real transformation happened if they made a genuine surrender and reconnected to their Source?

By referring to the post resurrection story of Thomas and Jesus, he raises the possibility of being “*wounded and also resurrected at the same time!*” (Rohr 2019, 111, emphasis in original).

Significant developments had taken place by the time a *Supplement to the Manual* was issued in 1990. It mentioned that those baptised as infants should in due course (i.e. as “young Christian people”) (PCSA 1990, Appendix B.2) might of their own free will profess their faith and be admitted to the sacrament of Holy Communion. In exceptional circumstances, others might be permitted to baptise, say in the case of a dying newborn baby. The PCSA had no policy regarding the baptism of dying or deceased babies. This was in practice regarded more as a pastoral than a theological issue and ministers would be free to decide whether or not to baptise the baby if so requested. But there was an important instruction that any baptised person “must not be re-baptised” (PCSA 1990, Appendix B.1) This would mean that a newborn baby at risk of death being baptised by a nurse might not be re-baptised if it survived.

Jongeleen’s (1985) article strengthened the case for infant baptism; however, the issue remained a live one among those who had been convinced that this was an error; however, such an error, if it was so, had been perpetrated by the Early Church Fathers, the Reformers, subsequent church studies, and experience. It also raised the issue of church discipline which was considered by the 1987 General Assembly. Here, discipline is referred to both as a means of nurturing the Christian community (in the family and in the Church through Christian education), as well as a sanction on those who have gone astray from the faith. These two seemingly contradictory views of discipline need to be held together in a creative tension within the evangelical purpose of the Church. Discipline was to be exercised in a persuasive rather than a coercive or threatening manner.

The committees on doctrine and discipline worked together on this matter as this was an issue which had legal implications within the Church. They faced the issue regarding the conditions on which baptism was given and the pastoral concerns attached thereto. The first issue concerned the increasing desire for rebaptism as a corrective to what they considered to be “invalid” infant baptism (PCSA 1987, 61). It was claimed that this was an error on the part of the Church for condoning and even promoting baptising without the due disciplinary preparation leading to indiscriminatory baptism. It was acknowledged that indiscriminate baptism had undermined the practice of infant baptism. Paedobaptism depends on a clear understanding of the covenantal nature of the sacraments. Children are part of the covenant through their believing parents’ membership in God’s corporate community (Baillie 1957, 80).

At the time, the Reformers rejected the concept of “godparents” who would make the vows in place of the parents as it minimises the covenantal nature of the sacrament. The baptism of children whose parents are not included in the baptismal covenant is contradictory. The committees rejected the idea of sponsors except in the cases of adoptive and foster parents if they too are part of the covenant community. Whatever the case, baptism is a means of incorporating a child into the fellowship of the covenant community (Church of Scotland 1958, 12). Scottish theologian, Donald Baillie (1957, 80–87) has affirmed this:

The sacrament of baptism brings the child into a new environment, the environment of the Church of Christ, which Calvin, following Cyprian, called the Mother of all who have God as their father ... 'If 'a baby must have love', it is also true that a baby must have the grace of God in order that it may grow as a truly Christian child. And it is through the faith and love of the Church and the parents, directed upon the children through physical channels and using the effective symbolism of baptism, that the grace of God reaches the scarcely conscious child.

The responsibility of ministers and sessions came under review because part of the problem lay with their lax approach to baptismal discipline. Here the Session bears the ultimate responsibility for decisions whether or not to baptise as well as the responsibility to emphasise to the congregation their responsibility in the nurture of baptised children by maintaining contact with the children and families. The 1987 General Assembly agreed that the sacrament of baptism should normally be celebrated during public worship by an ordained minister:

“Baptism is in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is accompanied by prayer and administered with water by immersion, pouring or sprinkling” (PCSA 1987, 227). This was to follow appropriate teaching on baptism: “Every baptised person, whether adult or child, is a member of the holy catholic Church” (PCSA 1987, 228). It also adopted the *Procedure to Be Followed with All Who Apply for Baptism* (PCSA 1987, 227).

In 1991, further changes were proposed to Article XX of the *Articles of the Faith* inherited from the Presbyterian Church of England on the formation of the PCSA in 1897. There was an anomaly between the Zwinglian and Calvinist approaches to the sacraments and it was decided in favour of the Calvinist view. The original Article XX was amended regarding baptism from:

Baptism with water into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost being the sacrament of admission into the visible Church, in which are set forth our union to Christ and regeneration by the Spirit, the remission of our sins, and our engagement to be the Lord's (PCSA 1990, 82)

to the following:

Baptism with water in the name of God the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit being the sacrament of admission into the Church and into the covenant of grace, in which are not only set forth but also conferred upon those who come to faith union with Christ and regeneration by the Holy Spirit, the remission of sins and engagement to be the Lord's. (PCSA 1991, 51)

Baptism becomes a process completed by the other sacrament of Holy Communion: “One enters the church through baptism and this is nourished within it by means of the eucharist” (Gonzales 1970, 203). For Luther (in Gonzales 1975, 64), “baptism is the beginning of the Christian life, but it is also the sign under which that entire life takes

place”. The same is true for Calvin. Baptism is valid throughout life, and not only at the moment of its celebration (Baillie 1957, 88; Calvin 1559, IV.xv.1–12) Luther (in Gonzales 1975, 65) points out an important justification for infant baptism:

To deny baptism to infants, on the ground that they have no faith, would imply that the power of baptism – and therefore, of the gospel – depends on our ability to receive it. This would simply be a new form of justification by works.

While Calvin (1559, IV.xv.20) agreed with Luther on this point, he could find no scriptural justification for paedobaptism, so he affirmed that “infant baptism is practiced as a sign of justification by grace and of God’s loving care, not only for us, but for our posterity”.

The Covenant and Baptism

A report on *The Covenant and Baptism* was presented to the 1997 General Assembly. This discussion paper had its origin in “the failure of the Church to practice [sic] baptismal discipline but also from a theological and cultural orientation at variation with that of the Reformed tradition” (PCSA 1997, 292), that is, between infant and believer’s baptism. The report reaffirmed that it was God who established the covenant out of a sense of faithful love to save and bless His people and that the human response was faithful love. This process is exercised in Christ (PCSA 1997, 290–293). While this is done to individuals, it is only relevant within a covenant community which, of necessity, includes children. For Origen, even children spoiled by sin must be baptised (Heick 1965, 216).

This was accepted doctrine within the Reformed tradition, although there were differing views on the implications of the covenant relationship regarding whether or not children were regenerated: “In harmony with this idea the spiritual effect of baptism as a means of grace was not limited to the time of the administration of the sacrament” (Berkhof 1937, 251). Beasley-Murray (1962, 335–336) argues for the fundamental necessity of the covenant of grace for infant baptism on various grounds; there is but one covenant of grace and one gospel; salvation is dependent on faith in God’s promises; and the unity of the Church; the sacraments as the fulfilment of God’s promises in and through Jesus Christ.

While the report accepted that not all parents would wish their children to be baptised as infants, it sanctioned the preparation of a service for the dedication of such children. In order to take account of the developing ecumenical climate of the time, further progress was arrested until the Church Unity Commission churches were consulted and in the light of the impending union with the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (RPCSA) (PCSA 1998, 248).

The South African Context in Recent History

In 1991, De Gruchy raised several issues concerning the transition of baptism from a private church matter into a public event. Referring to the seventeenth century Synod of Dort, where the practical effect of baptising slaves was to lead to their being freed, he argues that in the South African context:

If you baptised black persons, it would not only mean their entry into the “body of Christ”, but it would also require their acceptance into the body politic. Hence, their reluctance to engage in evangelism! A true understanding of baptism not only undermines apartheid in the church; it should undermine apartheid in society; it should also undermine apartheid in society, and all other forms of oppression as Paul indicates in Galatians 3:27–28. For baptism is a sign of human solidarity redeemed in Christ. (De Gruchy 1991, 216)

De Gruchy maintains his contextual approach to baptism by referring to the *Kairos Document* (1986, 2). Regarding both the oppressed and the oppressor, he comments:

They are both baptised in the same baptism and participating together in the breaking of the same bread, the same body and blood of Christ. They were in the same church, while outside Christian policemen and soldiers are beating up and killing Christian children or torturing Christian prisoners to death while yet other Christians stand by and weakly plead for peace. (Kairos Theologians 1986: 1–2 in De Gruchy 1991, 221)

While the sacrament bound all people together, politics drove them apart defying God’s mission of reconciliation for all people.

Conclusion

The issue of baptism was a serious matter in the life of the PCSA. Based on an understanding of scripture but without definitive biblical warrant, it was supported by the Early Church Fathers, the tradition of the Church and the leading Reformers. The sacrament came to be the sole means of entry into membership of the Christian Church no matter at what age it was celebrated. Yet, baptism has always resulted in controversy as in Calvin’s challenge to the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. Practice has varied from strict application of regulations to indiscriminate baptism. Much of the current controversy surrounds infant baptism while otherwise its meaning is clearly attested by the creeds of the Church as the only means of entry into membership of the Church. Recent challenges have come from external sources such as the charismatic movement. This movement had the poor effect of emphasising the individual rather than the people of God, the body of Christ. It also promoted experience to the detriment of the intellectual rational aspect of faith so common to the Reformed tradition and downplayed the role of the sacraments as testimonies of faith in the God who comes to us graciously and mercifully. Then there are those, members and ministers, who come into the PCSA with little or no understanding of the ethos of the denomination and little understanding of its polity and perhaps, its theology. Churches like the PCSA have been

susceptible to such challenges as the result of poor or non-existent teaching on baptism. Various attempts have been made to rectify this situation through teaching and preaching.

A lack of understanding combined with a desire for a more expressive form of faith and worship have led to the current situation where, combined with a lack of proper discipline, in both senses of the word, a variety of responses are made without the sanction of the denomination. With regard to the political aspects of racism and the resulting anomalies, baptism has been at risk of becoming a denial of inclusivity within the Presbyterian faith tradition rather than an affirmation of its power to unite. It is not only the teaching, preaching and celebrating functions of the ministry which need to be emphasised with regard to the sacrament of baptism, for ministers are ministers of the Word and sacrament, but also the pastoral function of ensuring the incorporation of all into the body of Christ “for all are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

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