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# John Calvin's Understanding of Baptism, and the Relation Between the Sacraments and Christian Ethics

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## I. Calvin's Understanding of Baptism.

John Calvin defines baptism as “the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the Church, in order that, engrafted to Christ, we may be reckoned among God’s children”.<sup>1)</sup> He mentions three tokens which are imparted to the Christian in baptism; forgiveness of human sins, the believer’s mortification and renewal in Christ, and the union between Christ and His believers.<sup>2)</sup> The first two of these tokens depend wholly upon the third, since Calvin’s teaching concerning baptism always returns to that figurative union.

While Calvin affirms that baptism is “a sign of forgiveness,” which does not signify the power of purification in water, it is God’s declaration that believers are incorporated into the body of Christ. Thus Calvin notes that “we put on Christ in baptism”.<sup>3)</sup> A theologian Daniel Migliore, likewise,

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キーワード：ジョン・カルビン，洗礼， sacrament，キリスト教倫理

1) John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n. d.), Vol. 2, p. 1303.

2) *Ibid.*, pp. 1304-1308.

3) *Ibid.*, p. 1305.

writes that “the event of baptism thus marks the beginning of the Christian’s participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.”<sup>4)</sup> Therefore, Calvin observes that Christ is the real object of baptism.

According to Calvin, baptism’s union with Christ represents not only His death and resurrection, but also His blessing.<sup>5)</sup> This mystical union occurs by the work of the Holy Spirit, by whose grace believers are transformed to the newness of life and brought into the fellowship of Christ.<sup>6)</sup> Ronald Wallace explains Calvin’s view that “this new life is the life of sonship of the Father in union with Christ, who was declared the son of God by the resurrection from the dead. Baptism is thus a sign of adoption into the family of God.”<sup>7)</sup>

Although I agree with all of Calvin’s aforementioned views on baptism, I am more hesitant concerning his theory of infant baptism. Calvin asserts that infant baptism corresponds to Jewish circumcision, since baptism occupies the place of circumcision to fulfill the same office among Christians.<sup>8)</sup> He sees both baptism and circumcision as the same confirmation of God’s covenant, which continues from the Old Testament to the New Testament.<sup>9)</sup> Because Scripture states that Christ invited and blessed little children as partakers of the Kingdom of Heaven (in Matthew 19: 13-15) , Calvin argues that Christians should not exclude them from the

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4) Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeing Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), p. 215.

5) Calvin, p. 1307.

6) *Ibid.*, p. 1325.

7) Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), p. 180.

8) Calvin, p. 1327.

9) *Ibid.*, p. 1329.

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sign and the benefit of baptism.<sup>10)</sup>

I agree with Calvin's view that the covenant in operation in the Old Testament is essentially the same as the covenant in the New Testament. Both baptism and circumcision symbolize salvation to its deepest and fullest extent. There is only one basic underlying covenant for all ages.

Jesus commands His apostles to go into the whole world to preach the gospel, and He says that "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned" (in Mark 16: 16). However, in other word, Jesus says that a person shall not be saved, even though he has been baptized, if he does not believe. Thus, without faith baptism would be in vain. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the covenant gave only one Mediator, namely Jesus Christ; there is only one condition for salvation, namely faith. Christians must not ignore that fact.

Migliore notes Karl Barth's opinion that "in baptism there is first an action of God (baptism with the Spirit) and then a corresponding human action (baptism with water): there is a divine gift and a human response."<sup>11)</sup> In a sense, Barth divides baptism into the baptism of the Spirit and that of water. The first refers to covenant love, and the last refers to human faith. I agree with this view since I believe that "baptism and faith are inseparably related."<sup>12)</sup> If this view is correct, infant baptism fails to explain how infants either receive baptism in faith, or witness to its faith before the congregation.

Calvin declares that rejection of infant baptism stands for the refection

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10) Ibid., p. 1332.

11) Migliore, p. 216.

12) Ibid., p. 218.

of infants as heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>13)</sup> Nevertheless, I must doubt whether the practice of infant baptism truly reflects the meaning of welcoming them into the Church community. Therefore, when Christians identify baptism with water as a declaration of their faith, it is difficult to regard infant baptism as the true baptism.

## II. The Relation Between the Sacraments and Christian Ethics.

The doctrine of the sacraments primarily brings an understanding that the promises given in the Word are that of a Christian's mystical union with the body of Christ. As I stated previously, for Calvin, this union with Christ is one of the most important doctrines for understanding the meaning of the sacraments. Calvin speaks of both sacraments as being signs of Christians' incorporation into the body of Christ.

Therefore, the purpose of the sacraments is to show the solidarity of all Christians as members of Christ's body. Especially in the practice of baptism, this union is obvious. Christians are joined to Christ's death and resurrection, that secret union by which they grow into one with Christ.<sup>14)</sup> Christians must realize that the union signifies not only the union between Christ and His believers, but also the union among all of Christ's believers. There is no difference in each individual, for all believers are equally engrafted into Christ. Migliore notes that "baptism creates a solidarity that defies and shatters the divisions and barriers that sinful human beings have created."<sup>15)</sup> Besides, Calvin suggests that there is no benefit in baptism

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13) Calvin, p. 1330.

14) Ibid., p. 1385.

15) Migliore, p. 224.

John Calvin's Understanding of Baptism, and the Relation Between the Sacraments and Christian Ethics without the unity.<sup>16)</sup> Accordingly, to refuse the gracious solidarity in Christ is to refuse to come to the one sure source of the grace of Christ. "Racism, sexism, and other ideologies of separation"<sup>17)</sup> must be eliminated from the Church, since they only cause a denial of solidarity within the Christian community.

Migliore explains that baptism signifies multid denominational solidarity, and the Lord's Supper signifies multid denominational sharing.<sup>18)</sup> Christians should comprehend that both sacraments are mutually related. To this end, Enrique Dussel notes that for Christianity to be a religion that emphasizes the spiritual union between believers in Christ, the Christian life should establish the essential importance of sensitivity for the needs of its members.<sup>19)</sup> This is indeed true for Christian life. Migliore addresses the Lord's Supper as "the sacrament of human participation in the divine life by sharing life with each other."<sup>20)</sup> Sharing life with others, because of the unity in Christ, is the most important issue concerning the relation between the sacraments and Christian ethics. There are millions of hungry Christians in the world, with whom Christians should share their bread and wine, if they are truly united in Christ. In this sense, the Lord's Supper requires the Christian's responsible participation in Christ's body by sharing each other.

Finally, implicit in the description of the practices of both sacraments is an understanding of importance of forgiveness in Christian life. Gregory Jones notes that "communities that come into being bearing the name of

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16) Calvin, p. 1385.

17) Migliore, p. 224.

18) Ibid., p. 225.

19) Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, trans. Robert R. Barr (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 66.

20) Migliore, p. 225.

Christ are to be communities in which forgiveness, not punishment, is the norm.”<sup>21)</sup> Since Christian community is to be shaped in the oneness with Christ through the forgiveness of God, members of Christian communities cannot engage in unity with Christ without forgiving each other. Through the practices of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, Christian communities should realize that their existence is based on Christ’s forgiveness, and that the practice of forgiveness relates to each Christian’s friendship in Christ. This forgiveness brings new life, union with Christ, and peace within Christian communities worldwide.

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21) L. Gregory Jones, *Transformed Judgment: Toward a Trinitarian Account of the Moral Life* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 147.