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The Efficacy of Baptism

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²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him (1 Peter 3:21-22, ESV).

Benjamin B. Warfield wrote *The Plan of Salvation* in order to create a taxonomy of soteriological positions. One of those positions in particular is a temptress to the faithful. So, Warfield writes both to inform and to warn. This seductress is sacerdotalism, and she eschews abstraction. However, what she identifies as abstraction, the historic church has identified as invisible, spiritual, or subjective. But to her these invisible spiritual realities are merely synonyms for the meaningless, and she denounces them with venomous vitriol.

But what is sacerdotalism? Warfield defined sacerdotalism as the notion that “God in working salvation does not operate upon the human soul directly but indirectly....”¹ In other words, when the bread of the Lord’s Supper or the water of baptism is said to work directly on the human soul as an agent of change (God working indirectly through them), then we have sacerdotalism.

The sacerdotal principle finds a complete form of expression in the Church of Rome.² However, the principle is present “wherever instrumentalities through which saving grace is brought to the soul are made indispensable to salvation; and it is dominant wherever this indispensability is made absolute.”³ This principle has impacted self-described evangelicals (e.g., Anglicans and Confessional Lutherans) and even some sectors of the Reformed church.⁴

Sacerdotalism certainly has its appeal, especially for parents concerned for the spiritual well-being of their children. Vanquished is the notion of the invisible church with its mystery of election known with certainty to God alone. No longer must the believer worry about having their assurance shaken, diminished, and intermitted. Why? Because the visible church alone stands at the ready to dispense the means of grace, not as instruments which the Spirit employs, but as agents which employ the Spirit.

¹ Warfield, Benjamin B., *The Plan of Salvation*, (Boonton, NJ: Simpson Pub. Co., 1989), 49-50.

² Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, 50.

³ Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, 11.

⁴ Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, 59. C.f. Richard Lusk, “Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy” in *The Federal Vision* (Athanasius Press, 2004). Lusk writes, “if God’s word is true the sacraments must be effectual means of salvation,” and, “To state it another way, in Westminster’s theology there is not such thing as a baptism that does not confer grace...” Lusk, “Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy”, 91, 99.

Consequently, all doubt regarding the spiritual well-being of our children is banished, and with it the abstract notion of personal piety. In other words, if we separate “the soul from direct contact with and immediate dependence upon God the Holy Spirit” and replace it with indirect “agents which employ the Holy Spirit” at man’s good pleasure, we have effectively removed all doubt as to the salvation of anyone, including our children.

However, what does Scripture say? In the first epistle of Peter and the twenty-first verse of the third chapter we read the words, “[baptism] ... now saves you.” Thus, the question is raised. Is Peter a sacerdotalist? In other words, does he believe that baptism is the indirect agent employed by God to bring about salvation in men, women, and children? To put it fixedly, is Peter teaching that God has divinely appointed water to be the indirect agent whereby man may employ the Holy Spirit in working salvation? It is this author’s contention that Peter is not a sacerdotalist. What is more, an exploration of 1 Peter 3:20-21 will bear this contention out. Therefore, in this paper, we will examine 1 Peter 3:20-21 in order to determine Peter’s view of the efficacy of baptism.

Typology in Pursuit of Fulfillment

Perhaps a basic question is in order: what is typology?⁵ R. T. France provides a foundational understanding for any typological theory.⁶ He argues that any type/antitype relationship must have an historical and a theological correspondence.⁷ This is basic. For instance, in Matthew 12:38-42 the historical correspondence between Jonah and Christ is the historical marker of being in the belly of the fish for three days and the Son of Man being in the tomb for three days. The theological correspondence is identified in the comparison that both Jonah and Jesus are prophets or preachers of righteousness.

It seems to me that those categories are useful, but for some, they are not enough. Regarding typology, Leo the Great once said something to the effect that shadows yield to substances and types cease in the presence of antitypes. Leo went on to sharpen the point of his statement saying, “victim passes into Victim, blood is wiped away by Blood.”⁸ One cannot help but notice the capitalization of the second use of “Victim” and “Blood”, thus adding a sense of *escalation* and perhaps even *prophecy* to the concept of typology.

In other words, whereas the type possessed hot coals with the promise of a fire, the antitype is the fire that the type could only promise. This promise may be described as prophetic in character as the type is necessarily driven to its antitype for promissory fulfillment.⁹ If we think again of the Jonah/Jesus typology, we see an escalation in Matthew’s summarizing statement, “something greater than Jonah is here”—that is, a greater prophet than Jonah is here (Matt. 12:42).

⁵ In this paper, I will not take up a foundational hermeneutical question, whether a type is only a type when it is identified as such by the Biblical authors, or whether the modern interpreter may identify a type in the Bible that has not been labeled as such by the inspired authors. (I say identify because the orthodox interpreter will always believe that the Holy Spirit embedded the type that is to be matched up with the antitype through Biblical hermeneutics).

⁶ R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter Varsity, 1971). France would use these categories but distance himself from a view of typology that I will advocate. For example, on page 42 he will argue that “there is no indication in a type, as such, of any forward reference.” In France’s understanding, typology is purely application after the exegesis is finished.

⁷ France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, 40-41.

⁸ John Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 85.

⁹ C.f. C. J. Williams, *The Shadow of Christ in the Book of Job* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 4.

One of the difficulties found in 1 Peter is that of identification. In other words, what is being typified? It may appear obvious that, to use Leo's form of expression, "water gives way to Water." Yet, this is only true if we take antitype (*ἀντίτυπον*) as an adjective modifying baptism. Thus, we would read "Baptism, which is the antitype of the flood water, now saves you." In other words, the flood waters correspond to baptismal waters.

But that is not the only way to read the Greek. The word antitype (*ἀντίτυπον*) might also be taken as a noun in apposition to "you."¹⁰ If antitype and you are in apposition this means that both have the same referent. In other words, there is a correspondence between the family of Noah (the type) and you, the Christian Church (the antitype).¹¹ The text would then read, "Baptism now saves you, who are the antitype of Noah and his company." However, those who take this grammatical direction do not relieve themselves of the baptismal questions which arise from this text, namely, how does baptism save? Therefore, it is best to retain the traditional interpretation in which the "antitype" is between the flood waters and baptism.

Yet, this raises a related question. On a grammatical-historical reading of the text, would it be possible to understand the flood as a type of baptism? To use Leo's words, would Moses have known that "water gives way to Water" in Genesis 6-9? Or was the flood just a flood? This is not simply a problem for this typological scenario but for others. Would an Israelite from Jonah's day have been able to infer that the Messiah would be in the grave three days as in Jonah's water ordeal? Some scholars are quick to separate the water from the Water.

But where does this leave typology? For many scholars, typology is not something found in the Old Testament but rather is something that is brought to it. In other words, the risen Christ provided a lens through which the Old Testament could be viewed. But this means that typology is not inherently found in the text but rather in the application brought to the text by the interpreter.¹² Consider Dan McCartney's observations in a 2003 paper delivered at an annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society:

Typology is a theological construction based on a conviction that two events in history or an event in history and a (separate) event in a text are somehow actually related (not just compatible or similar, nor just literarily related) in that the meaning of the former event (or the written record of such) only become fully

¹⁰ ὁ καὶ ὑμᾶς ἀντίτυπον νῦν σώζει βάπτισμα... Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th Edition. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), 1 Pet. 3:21.

¹¹ C.f. Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The Epistle of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1946), 203: "And water now saves you too, who are the antitype of Noah and his company, namely the water of baptism."

¹² I. Howard Marshall, ed. *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 210-211. In an essay, E. Earl Ellis writes regarding typology, "It is not so much a system of interpretation as, in the phrase of Dr. Goppelt, a 'spiritual perspective from which the early Christian community viewed itself.' In other words, typology is a perspective of application that the early church applied to the Scriptures of the Old Testament." Kaiser and Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 103-104. "Typology is not the same thing as an exegesis of a passage..." And "While typology is not a method of exegesis, it can enhance the already completed exegesis by further illustrating its truths with examples and historical correspondence." Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 7. Goppelt observes that typological interpretation "goes beyond the literal grammatical-historical explanation." R. T. France makes a similar argument. He argues that "correct exegesis of the Old Testament text" is "essential to typology." But "it is not correct to describe typology itself as a method of exegesis." R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1971), 41.

manifest in the later event. Such a construction cannot be derived purely from the events themselves. Historical meaning indeed provides a tethering point for typology, but what drives typology is the fulfillment in Christ, not the historical meaning itself.¹³

McCartney comments further on what is actually revealed in the Old Testament:

“Pure” grammatical-historical method in Old Testament study does not give us the gospel. When we try to read the Old Testament from the vantage point of its *original context* we find hints at the gospel, and we find principles about the nature of God and man that imply the gospel, and we find prophetic expectations of a gospel, but one cannot really see the gospel itself until one gets to the New Testament (cf. Heb. 11:39-40). But then we are, *after the fact*, able to see how the Old Testament is as a whole, *moving toward* the gospel. A second reading, a reading of the Old Testament from the standpoint of knowing its eventuation in Christ, manifests what God was doing all along.¹⁴

Thus, according to McCartney, on a first reading of the Old Testament you will not discover the gospel. But “after the fact”, that is, after the interpreter brings the gospel to the Old Testament, then we see how it would eventuate in the gospel.

This, however, raises some serious problems biblically, systematically, and confessionally. First, McCartney’s evaluation is not able to bear the weight of the biblical evidence. However, it is worse than that. McCartney seems to be in contradiction to what the Bible actually teaches. Consider McCartney’s assertions in light of John 8:56 (“Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.”). From McCartney’s above exposition, Abraham could have only seen Christ’s day “after the fact”.

Second, the problem worsens when considered through the lens of systematic theology and specifically when the topic of inspiration is brought into view. In other words, a position that privileges the human author over the divine author will not allow for a meaning of the text that would have been beyond the human author’s ability to conceive. Consider the analogy of Scripture from this standpoint. Advocates of this position will only allow antecedent Scripture to be compared to a text under consideration. All subsequent Scripture is off limits in the hermeneutical process because those texts may bring information into view unknown to the human author. However, if we privilege the divine author, we may then understand that types latent with meaning are placed there by the Spirit who inspired the human authors. To put it another way, “water gives way to Water” because God intended it to be so when he caused Moses to write Genesis 6-9.

The third problem for a view like McCartney’s is that it stands in opposition to the Westminster Confession of Faith. Consider this statement from the Westminster Confession of Faith paragraph 7.5:

This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other *types* and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, *all foreshadowing Christ to come*; which were,

¹³ Dan McCartney, “Should We Employ the Hermeneutics of the New Testament Writers?” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 2003), n.p.

¹⁴ McCartney, “Should We Employ the Hermeneutics of the New Testament Writers?”, n.p.

for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament (italics added).

Notice also Westminster Confession of Faith 8.6:

Although the work of redemption was not actually wrought by Christ till after his incarnation, *yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefits thereof were communicated unto the elect, in all ages successively from the beginning of the world, in and by those promises, types, and sacrifices, wherein he was revealed, and signified to be the seed of the woman which should bruise the serpent's head; and the Lamb slain from the beginning of the world; being yesterday and today the same, and forever* (italics added).

The Confession does not know a typology that can only be known as such after the fact. Rather, the Confession teaches that Christ was foreshadowed in the type. What is more, even though the work of redemption was not wrought until after his incarnation, the benefits signified in those types was communicated to the elect in all ages.

So, this is God's type. We must not simply dismiss the hard typological comparison as the product of man's creative imagination but instead understand that "water gives way to Water" because God gave us a type that foreshadowed Christ even in the Old Testament. So, the question is, what does the typology teach us about baptismal efficacy?

Grammar in Pursuit of Theology

Let us ask a basic question. Does baptism save? Someone may be tempted to answer what appears to be obvious: "Of course, baptism saves! That's what the text says! Didn't you just make that point?" Yes, I did argue that there is a typological relationship between the flood waters and the baptismal waters in our text. Surely, the water gives way to Water because the Spirit intended it to be so. But that does not answer the question, "Does baptism save?" So, how is that question to be answered?

The solution that Spirit-inspired Peter provides is careful grammar. Peter puts the saving agents in the text on display by using the same preposition. Noah and his family were saved "through water" (δι' ὑδάτος) and you are saved "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (δι' ἀναστάσεως). The point Peter makes is clear. Whereas Noah was saved through water you are *not* saved through water *but* through the resurrection.

There is another aspect worth noting. The preposition "through" (δι') is a dative which means that it can be understood in either an instrumental or a locative sense. If instrumental the flood waters would be seen as the means of Noah's salvation, that is, he was saved through water. However, if locative, the water would be viewed as a threat and thus the idea would be that Noah was brought safely through water. Which is it?

Often the answer that is given arises from faulty logic. Scholars mistakenly think Peter is teaching that in baptism we are saved by water, so, they say, water must have been the means by which Noah was saved.¹⁵ Consequently, they argue for an instrumental use of the dative.

However, in a parallel passage, 1 Corinthians 10:1-2, we find these words, “our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea...” Here we find that escape is through water. Bigg comments, “In Rom. 6:3, again, the water represents the death of Christ, through which we pass to the resurrection.”¹⁶

In these examples the water is not the means of our salvation but the evil through which we must pass. Thus, we may understand Peter to be employing the locative sense of the preposition. So, just as Noah was brought safely through the flood waters so too are we brought through death by the resurrection.

This reading is also consistent with how the Old Testament often views water. In Psalm 42:7 we read, “[your] breakers and your waves have gone over me.” In Psalm 88:7 we find something similar when the psalmist says to the Lord, “[you] overwhelm me with all your waves.” And Psalm 69 is perhaps the best example of a sustained water ordeal experience. In verses 1-2, the Psalmist says that the “waters have come up to my neck” and “I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.” And in verse 14, the Psalmist cries to be delivered “from the deep waters.”

What is more, Psalm 69 is not simply about a water ordeal, it is also messianic. The New Testament quotes the Psalm nine times, finding its fulfillment in Christ. What is more, it is hard not to see Christ in verse 4c, “What I did not steal must I now restore?” But the question begging to be asked is a simple one: how do we know that it wasn’t simply the disciples creatively reading Jesus back into the Old Testament text? The answer is in John’s gospel.

In John 15:25 we read, ἀλλ’ ἵνα πληρωθῆ ὁ λόγος (“But the Word ... must be fulfilled”).¹⁷ There are two grammatical points to be made here. First, it is striking that ἀλλ’, which is often used as an adversative by some commentators is here used to demonstrate correlation.¹⁸ Second, this first point coupled with the ἵνα followed by a subjunctive could be understood as an imperatival ἵνα, which explains why translations like the ESV read “must be fulfilled.” Thus, the Old Testament carries a prophetic aspect that reaches forward to its fulfillment in Christ, rather than a creative aspect that carries Jesus back to the Old Testament “after the fact”.

Furthermore, Geerhardus Vos gives biblical-theological direction to our grammatical conclusions. Vos invites us to see the interrelationship between symbol and type. In fact, Vos goes so far as to say that the gateway to the house of typology is through the house of symbolism or, in his words, “a type can never be a type independently of its being first a symbol.”¹⁹ But this assertion raises a question:

¹⁵ Charles Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1901), 164.

¹⁶ Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*, 164.

¹⁷ Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, John 15:25.

¹⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 1065. C.f. Steven Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010), 55-56.

¹⁹ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 145.

The main problem to understand is, how the same system of portrayals can have served at one and the same time in a symbolical and a typical capacity. Obviously this would have been impossible if the things portrayed had been in each case different or diverse, unrelated to each other. If something is an accurate picture of a certain reality, then it would seem disqualified by this very fact for pointing to another future reality of a quite different nature.²⁰

Vos answers:

The solution of the problem lies in this, that the things symbolized and the things typified are not different sets of things. They are in reality the same things, only different in this respect that they come first on a lower stage of development in redemption, and then again, in a later period, on a higher stage. Thus what is symbolical with regard to the already existing edition of the fact or truth becomes typical, prophetic, of the later, final edition of that same fact or truth.²¹

Consequently, we have a two-stage process of development. But here is a crucial point: it is only after having discovered what a thing symbolizes that we can legitimately proceed to understand what it typifies.²²

So, if water is a type, then it must have been a symbol first and if so, what did it symbolize? Here we return to our grammatical point. If we understand the preposition “through” (*δι’*) in a locative sense, we have our answer. The water is a symbol of judgment. It is the threat through which Noah and his family were delivered.

Baptism in Pursuit of Christ

Someone may ask how we are to understand the phrase, “Baptism now saves you through the resurrection of Christ”? Perhaps it might be helpful to personalize baptism to answer this question. Baptism would not stand up and say, “I did it! I saved you!” Staying with the personification of baptism, baptism would know the scriptural doctrine of *sola fide* and not contradict it. What is more, the text disavows a reading that would see baptism as having regenerative efficacy. That is to say, baptism does not save as if it could remove spiritual dirt like water can remove actual dirt.

There is an Old Testament parallel here. Baptism cannot wash away sin any more than circumcision can. In other words, circumcision could put off the flesh the way that water can remove dirt. However, neither circumcision nor baptism can remove sin. The regeneration of the inward man is the inward work of the Spirit of God and not of outward means, despite there being a sacramental union between the two. Peter presses this point. The apostle tells us that baptism is inward. It is “an appeal to God for a good conscience” (1 Peter 3:21). This appeal comes through a faith that has been internally wrought rather than outwardly administered by baptism. The Westminster Confession, following the Scriptures, teaches that God works immediately upon the human soul in salvation. Thus, the grace offered in baptism is conferred by the Holy Spirit.²³

To understand more fully the relationship between the waters of baptism and the effect that comes from the Spirit alone, it may be fruitful for us to explore the association between the two. The

²⁰ Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 145.

²¹ Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 145.

²² Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 145-146.

²³ Westminster Assembly, Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), 28.6.

Westminster Confession of Faith 27.2 helpfully sets forth the relationship: “There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.”²⁴ Thus, the efficacy of the sacrament does not depend on anything in the sacrament.²⁵ The sign of bread and wine remains bread and wine and does not become the thing signified by the sign. So, how may we understand the relationship? To put it differently, how does the sacrament of baptism pursue Christ?

A. A. Hodge, in his commentary on the Confession, seeks to explain this relationship more fully when he describes the relationship as symbolic, representative, and instrumental. He writes, “This sacramental union, therefore, between the sign and the thing signified is (a) symbolical and representative—the one symbolizes and so represents the other; and (b) instrumental because by divine appointment, through the right use of the sign, the grace signified is really conveyed.”²⁶ When applied to the waters of baptism as portrayed in 1 Peter we might say that the water is symbolic of the water ordeal observed in the flood. What is more, theologically understood, the water of baptism is instrumental in the sense that we receive that to which baptism points, namely, a cleansed conscience before God, not by the instrumentality of water, but through faith in Christ. That is to say, the outward points to the reality of the inward.²⁷

As we close, let us return to B. B. Warfield’s *The Plan of Salvation*. Near the end of that work, he shares “three aspects of the working of the sacerdotal system” which will provide a good evaluation for the work in which we have been engaged. First, Warfield reminds us that the sacerdotal system separates the soul from direct dependence upon God and situates man’s hope on the outward and external. Second, the sacerdotal system reduces the Spirit’s work to a mechanism initiated by the sacraments of the church. And third, as a consequence of the second, the grace of God is placed in the control of men.²⁸

Peter’s text and letter stand in direct opposition to sacerdotalism. One cannot find that system in Peter’s writing. Nor will not be surprising to discover that the teaching of Scripture is consistent with that found in the Westminster Standards. Only if one eschews grammar, neglects theology, and despises Scripture will he come to such conclusions. Men are always in favor of having more control. But the Scriptures, not to mention the Confession, places all control in the hands of our sovereign God. In him we must rest!

²⁴ Westminster Assembly, Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), 27.2.

²⁵ Westminster Assembly, Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), 27.3.

²⁶ Archibald Alexander Hodge, *A Commentary on the Confession of Faith: With Questions for Theological Students and Bible Classes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1869), 448.

²⁷ Westminster Assembly, Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 163. “What are the parts of a sacrament? The parts of a sacrament are two; the one an outward and sensible sign, used according to Christ’s own appointment; the other an inward and spiritual grace thereby signified.”

²⁸ Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, 63-65.