

The (In)Coherence of the Heidelberg Catechism on Baptism¹

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Abstract

This paper identifies the primary statements on baptism in the Heidelberg Catechism (HC) and probes the logic, coherence and scriptural support of those statements. Some statements appear inconsistent with other statements in the HC, or they cite scriptures out of context, or they lack scriptural support, or they appear problematic on other grounds. This paper does not address paedobaptist vs credobaptist arguments, but looks only at the internal consistency and coherence of the arguments made in the HC. Questions as to what a sacrament is or how it functions are not addressed.

Key Words

Heidelberg Catechism, Baptism, Circumcision, Holy Spirit, Supersessionism.

Introduction

This post evaluates the statements on baptism in the Heidelberg Catechism (HC) and probes the logic and coherence of those statements and their scriptural support as cited in the HC reference notes. Some statements appear inconsistent with other statements in the HC, or they cite scriptures out of context, or they lack scriptural support, or they appear problematic on other grounds. This paper does not address paedobaptist vs credobaptist arguments, but looks only at the internal consistency and coherence of the arguments made in the HC. Questions as to what a sacrament is or how it functions are not addressed.

The teaching on baptism in the HC are contained in Question and Answer 69 through 74 of Lord's Days 26 and 27. Each Question and Answer (Q&A) of these Lord's Days are quoted and discussed in sequence. The HC's scripture citations are included and are quoted using the NASB. Citations are expanded at times to provide context. The text of the HC quoted here are taken from the current Canadian Reformed Church online version.

Lord's Day 26

69. Question. *How does holy baptism signify and seal to you that the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross benefits you?*

¹ This is a modified version of a four part paper posted on the author's blog, the first part of which is located here <https://askingquestions.net/questions-about-baptism-in-the-heidelberg-catechism-part-1/>

Answer. *In this way: Christ instituted this outward washing¹ and with it gave the promise that, as surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly his blood and Spirit wash away the impurity of my soul, that is, all my sins.²*

¹ Mt 28:19.

² Mt 3:11; Mk 16:16; Jn 1:33; Acts 2:38; Rom 6:3-4; 1 Pet 3:21.

Note 1 Scripture Citation

Matthew 28:19 *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”*

Matthew 28:19 clearly constitutes the institution of baptism. However this text has no accompanying “promise” using words like those of HC Answer 69.

Note 2 Scripture Citations

Matthew 3:11 *“As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”*

Mark 16:16 *“¹⁶ He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. ¹⁷ These signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues;¹⁸ they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”*

John 1:33 *“ I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit. ’”*

Acts 2:38 *“ Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit..... ⁴¹ So then, those who had received his word were baptized...”*

Romans 6:3 – 4 *“³ Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”*

1 Peter 3:21 *“Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...”*

Discussion

Is Question 69 addressed to infants as well as adults, since according to the HC Answer 74, infants too are to be baptized? How can an infant understand this question posed to them?

Not one of the cited scriptures describes baptism as a “seal” as is claimed in Q 69; this is not surprising because no such Scripture exists.

The Matthew and John citations state that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit; they mention neither water baptism nor forgiveness of sins, nor a “washing” of or by the Spirit; thus these scriptures do not appear relevant to the HC’s Answer 69. These citations however do expose the lack of any presentation or discussion of the baptism in the Holy Spirit in the HC, and how it is related to water baptism.

The Mark citation is from the disputed long ending of Mark which is not found in earlier manuscripts, and which was probably an insertion of the post-NT church. The explicit claim in Mark 16:16 that baptism is a necessary requirement for salvation (“He who has believed **and has been baptized** shall be saved”) has no explicit parallel in the NT scriptures and is a typical teaching of the post-NT church.

Should one wish to claim that the long ending of Mark *is* valid scripture, then how would verses 17 and 18 be applied? Why do we not observe, after (believers’) baptisms, the accompanying signs of exorcisms, speaking in tongues, handling serpents, drinking poison, and laying on of hands for healing?

Peter in Acts 2 instructs his auditors to (1) repent, (2) be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and (3) receive the Holy Spirit. The three steps are more or less sequential. First must come repentance, then believing that forgiveness of sins is available in the name of Jesus and acting on that faith by being baptized in water, then the Holy Spirit can be received in what the above-cited Matthew and John passages call the baptism in/of/with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not described as washing away sins; the Spirit comes to fill vessels after they have been “washed” and cleansed by the blood of Jesus.

The purpose of the gift of the Spirit is not to cleanse from sin, but to empower believers to be faithful witnesses to the truth of the gospel, to live righteously and to keep God’s commandments. Thus in Acts 1:4-5,8 the risen Messiah “...commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” He said, “you heard of from Me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now..... ⁸but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses.....”

Sometimes the Holy Spirit is poured out before baptism, as happened in Cornelius’s house. This was done to demonstrate to Peter and those with him that God had cleansed these Gentiles through faith as they listened and believed in Peter’s preaching: Acts 10:43-48: “⁴³.....through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.” ⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking these words, **the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message.** ⁴⁵All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. ⁴⁶For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, ⁴⁷“Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” ⁴⁸And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.”

The citations from Romans and 1 Peter do not add anything substantially new in terms of scriptural support for HC Answer 69. Actually the 1 Peter citation, by linking baptism to “***an appeal to God for a good conscience***” would seem to be inapplicable to infants.

The wording of HC Answer 69 “...as surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly his blood and Spirit wash away the impurity of my soul....” not only binds the two events of external and internal washings so closely together as to suggest that they are two aspects of a single event, but it actually reverses the scriptural order of these two events, which is that the inner spiritual cleansing from sin comes first, then afterward comes the external sign of “washing” with water in baptism.

There does not appear to be any NT scripture that explicitly uses the analogy of baptismal washing as a basis for affirming the certainty of the washing away of sins by Jesus’ blood. The practice attested in the NT is rather the other way around. First comes repentance and faith in Jesus through which forgiveness of sins is obtained; after that, on the basis of the believer’s testimony to that renewal, baptism is performed – as per Acts 10:43-48 referenced above, and Acts 16:31-34 referenced below. In other words, baptism is not intended to function as evidence or proof that one’s sins are forgiven. It is rather the reverse - it is the reality of repentance, forgiveness and renewal that validates the rite of baptism. Thus the baptism of Simon in Acts 8 proved to be invalid, because his repentance was apparently insincere, as Peter discerns in Acts 8:21-22: “²¹ *You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.* ²² *Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours....*”.

The NT does not teach that the primary purpose of baptism is to bolster or strengthen the faith of those baptized. The inner reality of being cleansed of sin and receiving the Holy Spirit, both as internally experienced realities and in the case of the latter as manifested by Spirit-inspired utterances such as tongues, prophecies, praises etc. (e.g. Acts 10:43-48 quoted above), provide a much more reliable and certain basis for strengthening faith than the external rite of baptism. Surely the actual experience of receiving forgiveness and the Holy Spirit testify to the reality of God’s promises in a way that the “sign” analogy of baptism can never match. Thus Paul says in Romans 8:14-16: “¹⁴ *For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.* ¹⁵ *For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!”* ¹⁶ ***The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God....***”. It is the inner witness of the Holy Spirit that provides assurance that we are God’s children – not water baptism.

70. Question. *What does it mean to be washed with Christ’s blood and Spirit?*

Answer. *To be washed with Christ’s blood means to receive forgiveness of sins from God, through grace, because of Christ’s blood, poured out for us in his sacrifice on the cross.¹ To be washed with his Spirit means to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified to be members of Christ, so that more and more we become dead to sin and lead a holy and blameless life.²*

¹ Ezek 36:25; Zech 13:1; Eph 1:7; Heb 12:24; 1 Pet 1:2; Rev 1:5; Rev 7:14.

² Jn 3:5-8; Rom 6:4; 1 Cor 6:11; Col 2:11-12.

Note 1 Scripture Citations

The first citation (Ezekiel 36:25) is a single verse in a much longer passage about God’s promise to regather the House of Israel from the nations to which they had been dispersed, to bring them into the New Covenant and forgive their sins, and to restore them as a nation to their land. A significant

segment (verses 16 – 28) of the overall passage is quoted below to provide the context for the cited verse.

Ezekiel 36:25 “¹⁶ Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, ¹⁷ “Son of man, when the house of Israel was living in their own land, they defiled it by their ways and their deeds; their way before Me was like the uncleanness of a woman in her impurity.¹⁸ Therefore I poured out My wrath on them for the blood which they had shed on the land, because they had defiled it with their idols. ¹⁹ Also I scattered them among the nations and they were dispersed throughout the lands. According to their ways and their deeds I judged them. ²⁰ When they came to the nations where they went, they profaned My holy name, because it was said of them, ‘These are the people of the Lord; yet they have come out of His land.’ ²¹ But I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations where they went. ²² “Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. ²³ I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord,” declares the Lord God, “when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight.

- ²⁴ For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land.
- ²⁵ **Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.**
- ²⁶ Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.
- ²⁷ I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.
- ²⁸ You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers;
- so you will be My people, and I will be your God.”

It is very evident that this passage is part of a promise made by God to the physical House of Israel – a promise that expresses His covenant faithfulness to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and which is reiterated throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. This passage and the embedded cited text does not explicitly refer to the gentiles nor the blood of Jesus. To apply the cited text to being “washed with Christ’s blood” is to take this text out of context. Furthermore, its citation by the HC in this way implies a deeply supersessionist mis-appropriation of the promises of God to Israel and their transfer to the Gentile Church.

If such a transfer to “the Church” is defended, then how and when was “the Church” guilty of the charge in verses 17-20: “... when the house of Israel was living in their own land, they defiled it by their ways and their deeds; their way before Me was like the uncleanness of a woman in her impurity.¹⁸ Therefore I poured out My wrath on them for the blood which they had shed on the land, because they had defiled it with their idols. ¹⁹ Also I scattered them among the nations and they were dispersed throughout the lands. According to their ways and their deeds I judged them. ²⁰ When they came to the nations where they went, they profaned My holy name, because it was said of them, ‘These are the people of the Lord; yet they have come out of His land.’” ?

Zechariah 13:1 *“In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity.”*

The problem with the citation from Zechariah 13 is the same as the previous citation from Ezekiel discussed above. Zechariah 13:1 describes events concerning the “House of David” and the “inhabitants of Jerusalem”. This text – like the previous one - is taken out of context by the HC and is misappropriated and mis-applied via a supersessionist theological scheme.

The four citations from the NT: Eph 1:7, Heb 12:24, 1 Pet 1:2, Rev 1:5, and Rev. 7:14 all appear appropriate to their intended purpose. These citations alone would have been quite adequate to support the first half of HC Answer 70. By citing the Hebrew prophets out of context, the HC raises questions about how it understands and interprets scripture.

Note 2 Scripture Citations

John 3:5-8 *“⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit. ⁹ Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?”*

Romans 6:4 *“³ Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. “*

1 Corinthians 6:11 *“Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”*

Col 2:11-12 *“¹¹ and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; ¹² having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. “*

In the John 3 citation Jesus speaks of the need to be “born of water and the Spirit” or to be “born again” (or: “born from above”). Since Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand what he was saying, Jesus’s source for his words must be the Hebrew Scriptures. A likely source is Ezekiel 36:25-27:

- ²⁵ Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.
- ²⁶ Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.
- ²⁷ I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

In the above text, “sprinkled water” effects a cleansing from sin while the Spirit effects a radical change of the heart enabling obedience; both aspects are sovereign actions of God. Together they constitute

what Jesus describes as being “born again”. As discussed above under the “**Note 1 Scripture Citations**” this is embedded in a much longer passage describing the New Covenant promised to the House of Israel. The meaning of the HC’s phrase “to be renewed by the Holy Spirit”, based on their citation of John 3:5-8, presumably corresponds to what Jesus calls being “born again”.

The cited texts from Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Colossians each speak in somewhat different ways about the new birth that Jesus taught in John 3, as noted above. Colossians 2:11-12 in particular describes the new birth as the “*circumcision of Christ*” which is “*a circumcision made without hands*” effecting “*the removal of the body of the flesh*”, which evidently is the same as the “circumcision of the heart” spoken of by Moses in Deuteronomy 30:6 “**Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live**”, and which is reflected in the descriptions of the promised New Covenant for the House of Israel in Jeremiah (31:33-34) and Ezekiel (36:24-28).

It is remarkable that while so many of the scriptures cited in the HC deal in one way or another with the New Covenant, the HC in Lord’s Day 26 and 27, while mentioning it once in Answer 74, does not discuss it.

71. Question. *Where has Christ promised that he will wash us with his blood and Spirit as surely as we are washed with the water of baptism?*

Answer. *In the institution of baptism, where he says:*

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19).

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mk 16:16).

This promise is repeated where Scripture calls baptism the washing of rebirth and the washing away of sins (Titus 3:5; Acts 22:16).

Scripture Citations

The Matthew 28:19 citation contains only a command of Jesus, not a promise. It says nothing about blood and spirit washing as claimed in HC Answer 71. The Mark citation also says nothing about blood and spirit washing. That citation does include a promise, i.e. the promise of salvation to those who believe *and* are baptized – a problematic claim as discussed previously under HC Answer 69. Note that this text specifies belief *before* baptism and thus conflicts with HC Answer 74.

HC Question 71 states: “*...Christ promised that he **will wash us with his blood and Spirit as surely as we are washed with the water of baptism.***” The problem with this claim is that neither Christ nor the Scriptures has ever made such a promise. The HC here claims that a *future* washing with Christ’s blood is promised to those who “*are washed (present tense) with the water*”, i.e. whoever has been baptized can depend on being washed with Jesus’ blood (!).

The HC’s claims about what is taught in Titus 3:5 and Acts 22:16 are problematic. What does it mean for the HC to say that baptism is the “*washing of rebirth*” and the “*washing away of sins*”? How does that differ from the teaching of baptismal regeneration? The two texts cited by the HC do *not* state what is claimed. One wonders if the HC has read Scripture in error due to carelessness, or if it has deliberately

misrepresented Scripture? Why are these two texts not quoted, as are the previous two texts, but only cited? Let us examine what the texts actually say:

Titus 3:5 ***“He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,”***

Titus 3:5 refers to two actions or effects: the “washing of rebirth” and the “renewing by the Holy Spirit”; both correspond to Jesus explanation of the new birth in John 3:5-8 (see discussion under Q&A 70). Verse 6 clarifies that the Spirit is poured out upon us through Jesus – language that echoes the texts in the Gospels and Acts promising the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Neither water baptism nor water are mentioned in this citation.

Acts 22:16 *¹² “A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³ came to me, and standing near said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very time I looked up at him. ¹⁴ And he said, ‘The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth. ¹⁵ For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ **Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.’”***

Ananias calls Paul “brother”, thus Paul had evidently become a believer before Ananias came to him. Ananias says to Paul (a) “be baptized”, and (b) “wash away your sins calling on His name”. It is not baptism that washes away sins, it is calling on His name in faith that washes away sins.

How can the wording of this Question and Answer ever have been so formulated, and not only allowed to stand unaltered over the years, but also subscribed to by countless office-bearers of Reformed churches to the present day?

LORD’S DAY 27

72. Question. *Does this outward washing with water itself wash away sins?*

Answer. *No, only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sin.*

Excellent! Short and to the point scriptural question and answer. But then how can the HC let stand the immediately preceding Answer 71 which states that “...Scripture calls baptism the washing of rebirth and the washing away of sins? It appears that the HC attempts to address the contradiction between Answer 71 and 72 in the following Question and Answer 73.

73. Question. *Why then does the Holy Spirit call baptism the washing of regeneration and the washing away of sins?*

Answer. *God speaks in this way for a good reason. He wants to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ remove our sins just as water takes away dirt from the body.¹ But, even more important, he wants to assure us by this divine pledge and sign that we are as truly cleansed from our sins spiritually as we are bodily washed with water.²*

¹ 1 Cor 6:11; Rev 1:5; 7:14.

² Mk 16:16; Acts 2:38; Rom 6:3-4; Gal 3:27.

Question and Answer 73 do not actually resolve the contradiction between Answer 71 and 72, it simply restates and even reinforces the unscriptural content of Answer 71. Do Titus and Acts really teach baptismal regeneration as claimed in Answer 71? HC Question 73 says that the Holy Spirit say so, and Answer 73 says that God so speaks and teaches, but no further scriptures are cited in support. Answer 73 basically repeats what has already been stated in Answer 69, and the scriptures cited in Answer 73 have all been previously cited, only Galatians 3:27 is added.

Galatians 3:27 “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

There is no support in this text for the HC’s claims in Answer 73. The Galatians citation speaks of the believer being identified with Christ, an aspect of the Christian life that the HC in this series of Questions and Answers does not discuss.

The critique in the last paragraph of the discussion on Answer 69 is applicable to Answer 73 as well. One might further wonder that if God was so concerned that the external observable rite of baptism provide assurance of the inner spiritual reality of the washing away of sins by Jesus’ blood, then the baptismal practice of sprinkling as practiced in most if not all Reformed communities is certainly less suitable than immersion as practiced by most Baptist communities.

One also wants to know what the difference is between the first main sentence in Answer 73: “*He wants to teach us **that the blood and Spirit of Christ remove our sins just as water takes away dirt from the body***”, and the second main sentence: “*But, even more important, he wants to assure us by this divine pledge and sign **that we are as truly cleansed from our sins spiritually as we are bodily washed with water***”. Perhaps the restatement provides the HC an opportunity to claim that baptism is not only a ‘sign’ but also God’s ‘pledge’. The latter is devoid of scriptural support.

It is noteworthy that every Question/Answer from Q/A 69 through Q/A 73 uses some combination of the words “Spirit” and “wash/clean/remove sins” as summarized below:

A. 69: “...his blood and Spirit wash away....my sins”

A. 70: “To be washed with Christ’s blood means to receive forgiveness of sins...To be washed with his Spirit means to be renewed by the Holy Spirit...”

Q. 71: “...he will wash us with his blood and Spirit...”

A. 72: “...only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins.”

A. 73: “...the blood and Spirit of Christ remove our sins...”

Four out of five of the above state that cleansing from sin requires washing with Jesus’ blood **and** washing with Jesus’ Spirit (= the Holy Spirit). The teaching seems to be that both the blood and the Spirit are required in combination. However Answer 70 (correctly) states that forgiveness is achieved by Jesus’ blood alone. This is contradictory and confusing. Not one of the texts cited in support of these HC statements mentions a “washing with the Spirit” let alone that “Spirit washing” removes sins; why then is that phraseology used in the HC? If the HC cannot cite a single text that supports this wording, presumably no such text exists.

As noted above in the discussion under Answer 69, the scriptural pattern is that the Holy Spirit is given or poured out only upon those who have already been cleansed by the blood of Jesus. The purpose of the gift of the Spirit is not to cleanse from sin, but to empower believers to be faithful witnesses to the truth of the gospel, to live righteously and to keep God's commandments. Thus in Acts 1:4-5,8 the risen Messiah " ...commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now..... ⁸ but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses....."

It is remarkable that the HC does not mention the outpouring of or baptism in the Holy Spirit, either in these two Lord's Days on baptism or anywhere else. The baptism in the Holy Spirit is a major teaching of the NT and is one of the primary characteristics of the NT Church which distinguishes it from the OT people of God. The baptism in the Holy Spirit is mentioned in many of the scriptures cited by the HC in this series of Questions and Answers. Why in spite of its scriptural emphasis, does the HC have nothing to say about the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and instead propound a doctrine about the washing away of sins by the Spirit which has little if any Scriptural basis?

74. Question. *Should infants, too, be baptized?*

Answer. *Yes. Infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation.¹ Through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults.² Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant, they must be incorporated into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers.³ This was done in the old covenant by circumcision,⁴ in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.⁵*

¹ Gen 17:7; Mt 19:14.

² Ps 22:10; Is 44:1-3; Acts 2:38-39; Acts 16:31.

³ Acts 10:47; 1 Cor 7:14.

⁴ Gen 17:9-14

⁵ Col 2: 11-13

Answer 74 makes multiple claims in a less than lucid manner. To facilitate discussion, each statement and its scripture citations will be discussed in sequence. Note that the question of the eternal state of infants or small children who die before reaching the age of accountability is not addressed in the HC, nor in the HC cited Scriptures, nor in the Scriptures as a whole, and is thus not considered here.

Statement 1. *Infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation.¹*

Note 1 Scripture Citations

Genesis 17:7 *"⁷ I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you..... ¹⁰ This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹² And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the*

house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. ¹³ A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”.

The HC does not identify which covenant is being referenced in the above statement. The citation of Genesis 17 shows that it is the covenant with Abraham. God promises to establish His covenant with Abraham and his physical descendants, with the essential requirement of the covenant being circumcision of male children on the eighth day. The text further specifies that any male who failed to be circumcised was thereby excluded from the covenant. Circumcision is thus of the essence of this covenant, it is not just a “mark” or “sign”.

The covenant specified in this text is the Abrahamic Covenant “in the flesh”, and applies only to the physical descendants of Abraham. Gentiles are by definition not eligible for inclusion in this covenant. Therefore there is no automatic transference or application of these terms to any one else. There is no mention in this text of a “congregation”; Abraham was promised that his descendants would become a “great nation” with their own land (Gen. 12:2, 12:7).

Matthew 19:14 ¹³ *Then some children were brought to Him so that He might lay His hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ But Jesus said, “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” ¹⁵ After laying His hands on them, He departed from there. “*

The Matthew text does not mention baptism. Yes, Jesus cares about children, but the instruction to not hinder children from coming to Jesus would not seem to have application to the baptism of infants. Mark’s version indicates that the children Jesus is speaking of are at least old enough to “receive the kingdom” – Mark 10:15: *“Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.”*

Statement 2. Through Christ’s blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults.²

The offer of salvation is indeed extended to all, since Christ shed his blood for the whole world, which would include all adults and children. However each has to individually believe in order to avail themselves of Christ’s sacrifice: John 3:16 – *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”*

Note 2 Scripture Citations

Psalm 22:10 *“Upon You I was cast from birth; you have been my God from my mother’s womb.”*

Psalm 22 is a psalm of David, and is also generally understood to be prophetic of the greater Son of David the Messiah. Any application beyond David and his greater Son cannot just be assumed and would need to be justified. Further, as direct physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, David and Jesus the Messiah were both included in the Genesis 17 covenant cited above.

Isaiah 44:1-3 *“But now listen, O Jacob, My servant, and Israel, whom I have chosen: ² Thus says the Lord who made you, and formed you from the womb, who will help you. ‘Do not fear, O Jacob My servant; and you Jeshurun whom I have chosen. ³ ‘For I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring and My blessing on your descendants..”*

Isaiah 44 speaks to physical Israel/Jacob. This text promises to bless Jacob’s physical descendants with the gift of the Holy Spirit – precisely what Peter explains to the House of Israel in Acts 2, which is the next citation.

Acts 2:38-39 *“³³ Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear....³⁶ Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?”³⁸ Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you **be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.** ³⁹ For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.”.....⁴¹ So then, those who had received his word were baptized. “*

It is evident from the context that Peter’s statement in vs. 39 is made to the House of Israel: when he says “to you and your children” he is referring to the physical descendants of Israel. Peter explicitly includes the Israelite children because Abraham’s descendants were specifically included in this covenant, an inclusion that extended to the New Covenant circumcision of the heart:

*Genesis 17:7: “ I will establish My covenant between Me and you **and your descendants** after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.”*

*Deuteronomy 30:6 “Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart **and the heart of your descendants**, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.”*

Thus, when Peter refers to the “children” of his audience he means their descendants (as per Genesis 17:7 and Deuteronomy 30:6), NOT their infant children.

Further, the “promise” referred to in Acts 2:39 was not a promise of salvation as such – Peter’s auditors were already part of the covenant people of God – rather the promise was of the gift of the Holy Spirit promised to Israel as part of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31; Ezekiel 36:27). The promise is extended to “all who are far off”, i.e. the Gentiles (cf. Ephesians 2:13), but the promise is not extended to the Gentiles’ children (why not?).

It seems that the Gentile Church of the Reformation has seized upon the promise of the Holy Spirit given to physical Israel, expanded it to include “redemption from sin” and appropriated it for itself in a supersessionist manner without Scriptural justification. It is noteworthy that those of the House of Israel who were baptized were those who had “received his word” (vs. 41) i.e. those who could understand and act on Peter’s message – which evidently did not include small children. Thus, even

though “*the promise*” is for all the House of Israel - “*you and your children*” – that promise still had to be appropriated through individual repentance and faith. When his hearers ask Peter what they should do he says: “*Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*” (vs. 38). Peter does NOT tell them to bring their infant children for baptism.

The next baptismal event in Acts, involving Philip’s ministry in Acts 8, also included only those who believed. Thus Acts 8:12: “*But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.*” Believing men and women are mentioned, but not their children.

Acts 16:31 “³¹ *They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”* ³² *And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house.* ³³ *And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household.* ³⁴ *And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.”*

By citing this scripture the HC would seem to want to imply that infants or small children must have been part of this household, and so must also have been baptized. One wonders how carefully the HC has read the text. The text states that the word of the lord was spoken “*...to him together with all who were in his house...*”, implying all heard and understood; that his whole household “*...believed in God...*” and that all his household were baptized. If this household had any small children, they were probably asleep as it was after midnight; in any case they had no part in hearing, believing and being baptized.

Statement 3. *Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant, they must be incorporated into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers.*³

The preceding HC Statement 2 claims only that there is a promise made to infants. It says nothing about how that promise is realized or fulfilled. Thus the “therefore” of Statement 3 has no force because the logic is lacking. It is an example of the logical fallacy called *non sequitur*.

It is taken for granted that the infants discussed here are the children of believers. Three claims are made in this statement concerning such infants, each of which is problematic:

- baptism is (the) sign of “the covenant”,
- baptism is required to incorporate infants into the Christian church,
- baptism is required to distinguish such infants from the children of unbelievers.

The “covenant” mentioned in the first claim is not defined, however when one reads ahead to the last statement it becomes clear that the new covenant is meant. No scripture citation is offered in support of the claim that baptism is the “sign” of the new covenant, perhaps because there is no such scripture.

The second claim gives rise to the question as to what is meant by “*incorporation into the Christian church*”? This is normally understood to mean becoming a member of Christ’s body. How does that work for an infant who cannot yet believe? Or does the HC’s claim here imply baptismal regeneration?

The third claim appears to have no basis in the NT scriptures. Where does one find a NT requirement that infants of believers must be “distinguished” from those of unbelievers? To distinguish one thing from another implies being able to observe a difference in one or more characteristics of the things

being compared. How can baptism - a one-time external ritual that leaves no physical mark – function to establish any observable difference so as to enable a distinction to be made between the two classes of infants?

Note 3 Scripture Citations

Acts 10:47 *⁴³ Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.” ⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵ All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, ⁴⁷ “**Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?**” ⁴⁸ And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.*

The cited text speaks of water baptism being authorized for those who had been baptized in the Holy Spirit, which was taken by Peter as evidence that while he was preaching the gospel they had repented and believed in Jesus. This text says nothing that would support the claims of HC Statement 3.

1 Corinthians 7:14 *“ For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.”*

It is understood that the HC considers this text as support for infant baptism. The unstated assumption by the HC seems to be that since the children are not unclean but holy, they must have been baptized. However baptism is not mentioned in this text, and baptism is not the basis of Paul’s argument. Paul bases his argument that the children of a “mixed” marriage are holy on the fact that the unbelieving spouse is sanctified (made holy) through the believing spouse; if the unbelieving spouse were not holy then the couple’s children would not be holy. Note that the unbelieving spouse, although made holy, is not “saved” (vs. 16). Note also that in such mixed marriages, the children are not not children of “believers”, but children of one believer and one unbeliever, which makes the application of the HC’s criterion for “covenant” children to be “distinguished from the children of unbelievers” problematic.

Statement 4. *they must be incorporated into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers.³ This was done in the old covenant by circumcision,⁴ in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.⁵*

Note 4 Scripture Citation

Gen 17:9-14 *⁹ God said further to Abraham, “Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹² And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. ¹³ A servant who is born in your house*

or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.¹⁴ But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.

Statement 4 includes repetition of the preceding phrase from Statement 3 to clarify the meaning of the initial phrase of Statement 4: *"This was done in the old covenant by circumcision"*. It is clear that circumcision did not *"incorporate into the Christian church"*, therefore the only remaining reference for *"This"* is to the phrase *"...distinguished from the children of unbelievers."* But under the Abrahamic covenant, as is clear from the cited text, the terminology is not that of "believer" and "unbeliever", nor that of being a child of one or the other, but simply that of being "circumcised" or "uncircumcised" (on the eighth day), without explicit reference to the condition or status of the parents. The HC's attempt to equate the function of baptism with circumcision on the cited basis must be evaluated as being unsuccessful.

The Genesis 17 citation also states that not being circumcised constitutes a breaking of the covenant resulting in exclusion from the people of God. If baptism replaces circumcision, does the NT believer who delays baptism (as practiced by some in the early church including Emperor Constantine) then also experience such exclusion? Then how long can the NT believer postpone baptism before he "loses his salvation"? And would that then imply that such a "believer" was not really one of the elect?

Note 5 Scripture Citation

Colossians 2:11-13 ***"and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ;¹² having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.¹³ When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions,"***

The citation of Colossians 2:11-13 is intended by the HC to provide scriptural support for the claim that circumcision was abolished and baptism was instituted to replace it. However Colossians 2:11 describes the circumcision of Christ as being *"a circumcision made without hands"* effecting *"the removal of the body of the flesh"*. Thus the "circumcision of Christ" cannot be baptism which is an external rite performed with hands.

The circumcision of Christ would appear to be the equivalent of the "circumcision of the heart" spoken of by Moses in Deuteronomy 30:6 *"Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live"*, and which is reflected in the descriptions of the promised New Covenant in Jeremiah (31:33-34) and Ezekiel (36:24-28).

Colossians 2:12 speaks of baptism as an enacted symbolic burial and resurrection whereby the believer by faith identifies with Christ in his burial and resurrection. Thus this text presents baptism as an outward sign or symbol of the inner heart circumcision.

In Colossians 2:13 Paul describes the condition of his Gentile hearers before they received the gospel as *"... dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh..."*. In other words there were two

aspects involved in their being “dead” – their “transgressions” and their being “uncircumcised”. It is likely that Paul considered these two aspects as inter-related. That Paul believed circumcised Jews to have (present tense) significant advantages over uncircumcised Gentiles is demonstrated in Romans 3:1-2 “¹Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? ²Great in every respect.” It would thus appear that Paul considered circumcision to have continuing significance, which makes the concept that circumcision was replaced problematic.

Based on the above analysis of Colossians 2:11-13, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The “circumcision of Christ” is an internal spiritual work done “without hands” and cannot be the same as baptism which is an external rite done with hands.
- There is no mention in this text or in any other NT text that the spiritual “circumcision of Christ” replaces or supersedes anything, not even physical circumcision.
- There is no mention in this text or any other NT text that physical circumcision was abolished or superseded; rather Paul believed that it remained significant.
- There is no mention in this text or any other NT text that baptism supersedes or replaces anything.

The above points are consistent with the understanding that Jewish believers remained obligated to physical circumcision, whereas Gentile believers were obligated to remain uncircumcised (Acts 15; 21:17-24; 25:7-8; 28:17; Galatians 5:2).

Conclusions

Some of the claims made by the HC in Lord’s Days 26 and 27 on water baptism appear to be unsupported by scripture; those include the following:

- Baptism is a seal and/or pledge.
- Baptism provides certainty of forgiveness of sins.
- Baptism is intended to strengthen faith in the effectiveness of Jesus’ blood in washing away sins.
- Baptism effects the the new birth.
- Baptism is the sign of the New Covenant.
- Baptism has replaced circumcision.

The claim that baptism has replaced circumcision is one of the central claims concerning baptism in the HC, and is used as the principle argument that infants should be baptized. Ultimately that claim rests not so much on the teaching of Scripture, but rather on the prior claim that the Church has replaced Israel. Neither claim has clear and unambiguous scriptural support.