

CALVIN ON THE IRREPEATABILITY OF TRIUNE BAPTISM -- Dr. N. Lee

The 1545^f Romish Council of Trent alleged¹ that "Baptism...cannot be repeated.... Whosoever shall say that true and duly conferred baptism is to be repeated to him who has denied the faith of Christ among infidels, after he turns to repentance -- let him be *anathema!*"

To this, John Calvin in 1547 responded:² "That Baptism is not to be repeated, the pious are sufficiently agreed.... I not unwillingly subscribe" to this!

In the same year, Calvin declared³ that "the children of papists," baptized in the Romish Church, "are validly baptized." He denied that they were "strangers, just because they were begotten neither of a holy father nor born of a holy mother. They cease not to be [descendents alias] 'children of saints' -- though it be necessary to go farther back for their origin. God does not stop at the first degree, but diffuses the promise of life to a thousand generations."

In the 1559 edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin compared the Catabaptists of his own day to the earlier Donatists. The latter were the 313^f A.D. sectarians who rebaptized Catholics who donatized.

As Philip Schaff observes in his famous *History of the Christian Church* (III:92), "Chrysostom taught: 'We baptize children'.... As to infant baptism, there was in this period a general conviction of its propriety and of its apostolic origin. Even the Pelagians were no exception.... Heretical baptism was now generally regarded as valid, if performed in the Name of the Triune God...; except among the Donatists, who entirely rejected heretical baptism (as well as baptisms administered in the Church Universal)."

This does not mean the Church Universal rejected the validity of baptisms administered by the Donatists. It did not! It means the Donatists rejected the validity of baptisms administered by the Church Universal. Yet, even the Donatists baptized their own babies. *Synod of Laodicea*, canon 48 (A.D. 397); *African Code*, canon 57 (A.D. 419).

Now while confuting "the error of the Donatists," Calvin also added:⁴ "Such in the present day are our **Catabaptists**, who deny that we are duly baptized -- because we were baptized in the papacy by wicked men and idolaters. Hence they [the paedobaptist Catabaptists] furiously insist on anabaptism" alias rebaptism.

"Then again, when they [the Catabaptists] ask us what faith for several years followed our baptism, so that they may thereby prove that our baptism was in vain, since it is not sanctified unless the word of the promise is received with faith -- our answer is that, being blind and unbelieving, we for a long time did not hold the promise which was given us in baptism. But that still, the promise -- as it was of God -- always remained fixed, and firm, and true.... We acknowledge therefore that at that time, baptism profited us nothing -- since in us the offered promise, without which baptism is nothing, lay neglected.... But we do not believe that the promise itself has vanished.

"We rather reflect thus: God in baptism promises the remission of sins, and will undoubtedly perform what He has promised to all believers. That promise was offered to us in

baptism. Let us therefore embrace it in faith! In regard to us, indeed, **it was long buried on account of unbelief. Now, therefore, let us with faith receive it!**

"Therefore, when the Lord invites the Jewish people to repentance, He gives no injunction concerning another circumcision -- though (as we have said) **they were circumcised by a wicked and sacrilegious hand**, and had long lived in the same impiety. **This**, He urges, is conversion of heart. For howsoever much the covenant might have been violated by them -- the symbol of the covenant always remained, according to the appointment of the Lord: firm and inviolable! Therefore on the condition of **repentance**, they were restored to the covenant which God had once [and for all] made with them in circumcision -- though this which they had received at the hand of a covenant-breaking priest, they had themselves, as much as in them lay, polluted and extinguished!"

Calvin wrote⁵ also to his ex-student the Scottish Reformer John Knox in 1559 that "God's promise comprehends the offspring of every believer not only in the first line of descent -- but extends to thousands of generations [Exodus 20:5f and Isaiah 59:20f].... The interruption of piety which has prevailed in Popery, has not taken away from baptism its force and efficacy.... Offspring descended from holy and pious ancestors [such as godly mothers and grandmothers], belong to the body of the Church -- **though their fathers and grandfathers may have been apostates!**" Compare: Isaiah 59:21; Acts 16:1; First Corinthians 7:14; Second Timothy 1:5.

Continued Calvin: "No just reason suffers children to be debarred from their initiation into the Church [Visible], in consequence of the bad conduct of only one parent.... [Yet] nothing is more preposterous, than that persons should be incorporated with Christ -- of whom we have no hopes of their ever becoming His disciples. Therefore, if none of its relatives [such as the Protestant father of an infant with a Romish mother] present himself to pledge his faith to the Church that he will undertake the task of instructing the infant -- the rite is a mockery, and baptism is prostituted."

Yet even a prostituted baptism in the Church of Rome or elsewhere, is still a baptism -- just as much as a prostitute is still a woman. For a woman does not cease to be a woman, even if she becomes a prostitute. Neither does triune baptism lose its validity -- even if administered by the great harlot of Revelation seventeen (or by one of her daughter harlots such as Campbellism).

Yet, according to Calvin, the responsibility of parents to give their baptized children a Christian education -- is very heavy. For he rightly explained⁶ that "they are to promise to instruct the child to be baptized, in the doctrine." Indeed, they are "to warn him/her to live according to the rule of Christ -- in self-denial, dedication and the service of God; and to the edification of one's neighbour."

For these reasons, Calvin regarded it as **impermissible for infants of Romanists to be baptized by Protestant Ministers**. Obviously, in such cases -- there is no likelihood at all of those infants being provided with a Christian education according to the pure Gospel!

Calvin's *Letter to Farel*⁷ about this very matter, is most instructive. A member of Farel's congregation -- apparently a middle-aged widow -- had encouraged her daughter to marry a Romish man. That daughter then went ahead and did so.

Subsequently, the daughter renounced the Reformed faith -- and herself become a Romanist. After a child was then born to the daughter -- the member of Farel's congregation (herself being the above-mentioned grandmother of the child) requested its baptism in **the Reformed Church**.

Farel rightly refused. He regarded the child as being outside the covenant -- because both parents were Romanists. But Farel's Co-Pastor pointed out that the grandmother, who was herself still a member of the Reformed Church, had promised to raise that grandchild of hers in the Reformed faith -- and to care for its education for the rest of her life. However, because Farel could not regard this grandmother's promises as trustworthy -- he sought the advice of Calvin.

The great Genevan replied that for Protestant pastors **to baptize those who could not be regarded as members of the Protestant Church -- is foolish and impermissible**. The baptismal sponsors would have to be required to promise to nurture the child in the **Reformed** faith. They would have to possess the power and authority to do so -- either in themselves, or by being requested to do this by the father and/or the mother of the child. Failing this authority -- the baptism should not be performed (in a Reformed Church).

Did the grandmother really have the right to educate the child? No, for the grandchild concerned was not then a member of her household. However, even if the grandmother were to acquire that right -- such as in the event of the deaths both of that grandchild's parents as well as that of the other grandparents -- was the 'Reformed' grandmother truly desirous of giving her grandchild a Reformed education? A child should not be baptized in a Reformed Church, just to please a grandmother -- especially if that grandmother did not have the right to educate the child, and also if the child still stood outside of that grandmother's own household.

Again, it should also be investigated whether the grandmother was now -- after her former bad advice to her own daughter (to marry the Romish man)! -- really a good member of the Reformed Church. Did she really occupy a place in the congregation of the pious? Did she have the ecclesiastical right even to sponsor the baptism of her grandchild in a Reformed Church?

As matters stood, she was worthy of excommunication -- on account of her having encouraged her daughter to marry the Romanist. Consequently, she had forfeited her possible claim to baptismal sponsorship (*jure sponsionis*) of her own Romish grandchild -- in a Reformed Church.

Anyway, **the grandmother would first have to confess her guilt** -- before the grandchild should ever be baptized under her sponsorship in a Reformed Church. **Until then**, concluded Calvin -- **the Reformed Church should refuse to baptize the child**. For -- as he also said elsewhere⁸ -- "the Turks, the Jews, the Papists, and all their ilk -- are cut off and alienated from Christ."

Calvin once comforted a father whose child had died unbaptized. The father had been unwilling to have it baptized in the Roman Church -- even though that was the only religious institution in the place where he lived.⁹ Indeed, to a worried gentleman of Turin, whose **baby**

had died unbaptized, Calvin had also written: ¹⁰ "**Do not fear**, but rely boldly on God's promise [Genesis 17:7] -- 'I am the God of thy seed!'"

Further, to a Christian in Provence, Calvin wrote a letter¹¹ about the condition of the former's child -- which had died before receiving baptism. Apparently, both of the child's parents had been Roman Catholics at the time of the conception. During the pregnancy, however, it seems they had both become Protestants in their hearts. For then they had resolved, after the birth, to join the Reformed Church -- and then to have the child baptized there. Sadly, however, the child had unexpectedly died unbaptized -- before the parents had in fact had sufficient time to adjust themselves, as new Members of the Reformed Church.

Declared Calvin in that 1554 letter: "Dearly beloved brother! I have learned that God has, within these few days, visited you with a twofold affliction. First, **in taking to Himself[!] the child** with which He had blessed you.... Next, that some worthy brethren are scandalized -- because you did not have...[the child] baptized in time, though the means were within your power....

"With regard to the child dying without having been baptized, our worthy brethren would certainly have occasion to be scandalized at it -- had that taken place from indifference or contempt. For baptism is too sacred a thing to be left in the background.... In your case, in point of fact -- all you have to do is to declare to the brethren what were your intentions, to take away all subject of scandal....

"If your intentions had been to reside in those parts as one of them -- you could not, without offending God and your neighbours, have brought up your child without having it baptized. Not that those who present their children to be polluted with Popish superstitions, are to be held excusable. But your intention was quite different....

"You were desirous to take refuge, even before the period of your wife's confinement, in the bosom of the [Reformed] Christian Church.... Should this [at that time] be found impracticable, you thought of conveying the child [into the Reformed Church] soon after its birth -- along with its mother -- in order to have it baptized according to the ordinance of God....

"This would have been an open declaration that you were very far from despising baptism! [Yet,] on the contrary, from the deepest respect in which you held it [infant baptism], you wished it to be pure and entire -- such as was instituted by our Lord. **Such a delay** -- forming part of the confession of your faith! -- ought not to offend the godly....

"It is lawful for a Christian man to withdraw himself from the pollutions of Popery.... It is not only lawful but obligatory for him to take with him his infant child -- in order to offer it with purity to God, and have it baptized without Popish superstition....

"Now [however,] God has been pleased to deprive you of that blessing" of having your child baptized at all -- and indeed specifically in a Reformed Church. "Your intention was both pious and praiseworthy.... Your child has been deprived of baptism, which is the sign of salvation.... Its condition is not the worse for that, before God.... It brings no prejudice to the salvation of your child that it died before you had leisure to have it baptized!"

Summarizing, according to Calvin: First, all sons of Adam are sinners from their very conception onward.¹² Second, there is a difference between unborn believers and unbelievers.¹³ Third, regeneration generally precedes regular baptism.¹⁴ Fourth, baptism itself never regenerates and is not necessary for salvation¹⁵ Fifth, baptism is not for the dead nor for the dying.¹⁶ Sixth, baptism should be given only to those who already seem to be believers (whether infants or adults).¹⁷ Seventh, baptism should take place only in a church setting.¹⁸

Eighth, Scripture requires that parents at Protestant baptismal services for their children, promise to raise their children in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Clearly, this promise cannot sincerely be given by Romanists. Consequently, Protestant churches should refuse to baptize the children of Romanists not yet protestantized -- and also the children of all other persons who cannot yet creditably profess the Protestant faith.¹⁹

Ninth, the children of backslidden Protestants should not be baptized in Protestant churches until those backsliders have first been restored to full fellowship within the Protestant Church. Protestant parents who have their children baptized in Romish churches, or who get themselves rebaptized either in Romish or Baptist churches, are censorable. Yet baptizees who lapse from the Christian faith even into infidelity -- should never be rebaptized after their later reconversion to Christianity.²⁰

Tenth, nevertheless, all "children of papists" (and even of backslidden non-papist Christ-professing parents), once baptized -- even if only in the Romish Church -- "are validly baptized" quite unto the thousandth generation. Consequently, they should never be rebaptized if and when they become Protestants. For triune baptism administered even in the Church of Rome is without question thoroughly valid.²¹

The author, Rev. Professor-Emeritus Dr. Francis Nigel Lee, wholeheartedly agrees with Rev. Professor Dr. John Calvin. Both Calvin and Lee were baptized in infancy within the Church of Rome; converted to Protestantism as adults; and never re-baptized, either by sprinkling or by submersion.

The Bible says: "Let us cease to speak about the first principles of Christ, and press on unto perfection -- not laying down again a foundation of...the teaching of baptism.... They crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame!" Hebrews 6:1-6.

As Calvin rightly comments here: "The children of believers were baptized as infants, since they were adopted from the womb, and belonged to the body of the Church by right of the promise.... This single passage is abundant evidence that the origin of this rite came from the Apostles.

"Afterwards, it [baptism] was turned into a superstition..... They [the Romanists and certain other groups such as the Eastern-Orthodox and the 'Church of Christ' Campbellites] have invented the fiction that it is a Sacrament by which the Spirit of regeneration is conferred. By this invention, they have mutilated baptism....

"Today, we must retain the institution in its purity, but we must correct the superstition. This passage also tends towards the approval of Paedobaptism....What great thing would the

Apostle be saying, in maintaining that the repentance which is the adjunct of baptism, could not be repeated?"

Rebaptism, then, is a recrucifixion of Christ! "In him who is [re-]baptized, the Son of God is [re-]crucified" (Ambrose's *On Repentance* II:7:12). "He then that baptizes a second time, crucifies Him again" (Chrysostom's *Homily on Hebrews* 6:1-3). "Those who get rebaptized... 'crucify the Christ afresh' (John of Damascus's *The Orthodox Faith* IV:9).

Have you, dear reader, ever been rebaptized -- either by a Thornwellian Catabaptist or by a well-meaning Baptist? If so, it is time to repent of that symbolic recrucifixion of Christ!

Endnotes

¹ Sess. VII, *Of the Sacraments in General* can. IX, and *Of Baptism* cans. XI-XIII.

² Calvin's *Tracts and Treatises*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, III pp 176 & 182.

³ *Ib.* III p 351.

⁴ *Inst.* IV:15:16-18

⁵ *Selected Works of John Calvin*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1983, Vol. 7, pp 73f.

⁶ Calvin: *Form for Administration of Baptism*, in *Corp. Ref.* VI:188.

⁷ In *Corp. Ref.* XIV:567f.

⁸ *Sermon* on Eph. 1:7-10.

⁹ *Corp. Ref.* XIII:308.

¹⁰ *Ib.* XV:227-8.

¹¹ *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 6 pp 71f n 1.

¹² See: Calvin's *Comm.* on Ps. 51:5, Jh. 3:3-8, Rom. 5:12-17 & Eph. 2:1-3; his *Inst.* IV:16:17f; his *True Meth. Giv. Peace* (with its *Append.*); in *Corp. Ref.* 8:615; and his *Op. Omn.* 8:522.

¹³ See: Calvin's *Comm.* on Gen. 17:7-14, Ex. 11:7 - 13:5, Ps. 22:9-10, Lk. 1:15-45, Rom. 9:11-13, 11:16, I Cor. 7:14 & II Tim. 1:5-6; his *Serm.* on Eph. 1:7-10; his *Inst.* IV:16:5f,17f,24f; his *Lit. Form for Admin. Bap.*; & his *True Meth. Giv. Peace*.

¹⁴ See: Calvin's *Comm.* on Ezk. 20-21, Mt. 19:14, Acts 2:38-39, 10:47, 16:15, 22:16, Rom. 4:10-12 & Heb. 6:2; his *Inst.* IV:16:20f; his *True Meth. of Giv. Peace*; his *Antid. to Trent*; his *2nd Def. Vs. Westphal*; and his *True Partak. Holy Sup.*

¹⁵ See: Calvin's *Comm.* on Gen. 17:14, I Cor. 1:17, 12:13, Gal. 5:3, Eph. 5:26, Tit. 3:5 & Heb. 6:2; his *Antid. to Arts. of [Rom.] Paris Theol. Fac.*; his *True Meth. Giv. Peace*; his *Append. True Meth. Reform. Church*; his *Antid. to Trent*; his *Cons. Tig.*; his *2nd Def. Vs. Westphal*; and his *Let. to a Chr. Gent. of Provence* (in his *Sel. Works*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1983, 6 pp 71f).

¹⁶ See: Calvin's *Comm.* on Dt. 30:6, Jer. 4:4, 9:25f, Rom. 2:25-29, 6:1-9, I Cor. 10:1-6 & 15:29; his *Inst.* IV:15:20f; his *True Meth. Giv. Peace*; his *2nd Def. Vs. Westphal*; and his *Op. Omn.* 15:227-8.

¹⁷ See: Calvin's *Comm.* on Gen. 17:7f, Mk.16:16, Acts 3:25, 8:12-16, 8:37, 13:33, Rom. 11:16 & I Cor. 7:14; his *2nd Def. Vs. Westphal*; and his *Let. to Farel* (in *Corp. Ref.* 14:567).

¹⁸ See: Calvin's *Comm.* on Ex. 4:22-26, I Cor. 4:1, 10:1-11 & Heb. 5:4; his *Inst.* IV:15:20-22; his *Lit. for Admin. Bap.*; his *Eccl. Ord.*; his *Regist. of Genev. Past.*; and his *True Meth. Giv. Peace* (with its *Append.*).

¹⁹ Calvin's *Form for the Administration of Baptism*, in *Corp. Ref.* VI:188; *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 6 pp 71f.

²⁰ Calvin's *Letter to Farel* (in *Corp. Ref.* XIV:567f; *Tracts and Treatises*, III p 182.

²¹ *Appendix to the Tract on the True Method of Reforming the Church*, in *Tracts and Treatises*, III p. 351; *Inst.* IV:15:16-18.

