

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 15 – Part 1
BAPTISM

This chapter is the first of two in which Calvin looks at baptism. Here he examines the basic understanding of baptism and in Chapter 16 he will deal with the issues of infant baptism and the connection between baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Summary: Calvin begins with a simple statement about baptism. *"Baptism is the sign of initiation by which we are received into...the church, in order that, engrafted into Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children."* (pg. 1303), and then moves on to three essential aspects of baptism.

The first essential aspect of baptism is that it *"...is a token and proof of our cleansing"* (1304). What he means by this is that in baptism our sins are forgiven. As Calvin writes about this aspect of baptism, he balances two competing claims. On the one hand, he claims that something does happen in baptism; that baptism is more than merely *"...a token and mark by which we confess our religion before men"* (pg. 1304). On the other hand, he wants to claim that there is no saving power in the water, meaning in the act itself. He writes that water does not *"...contain within itself the power to cleanse, regenerate and renew; nor that here (in baptism) is the cause of salvation"* (pg. 1304). This is so because we are cleansed through Christ's death and resurrection, which the water represents. Calvin therefore, desires that in baptism we see something happening (being cleansed of sin) but at the same time not seeing magic in the action itself.

Calvin continues his discussion of the cleansing power of baptism by stating that baptism cleanses us of sin not merely for past sins, but for all sins for all time. *"But we must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once and for all washed and purged for our whole life. Therefore, as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins"* (pg. 1305). This does not mean that we do not sin. What it means is that when we do sin, we can be certain that forgiveness has already been given and that we will not lose either God's love or our salvation.

The second essential aspect of baptism is that it shows our new life in Christ. Calvin quotes Paul, *"we have been baptized into his death," "buried therefore with him into death...that we might walk in the newness of life"* [Romans 6:3-4] (pg. 1307). The image Calvin uses to describe this is that those who are baptized are like twigs grafted into a tree, drawing nourishment from the tree's roots; meaning that we are grafted into Jesus and draw our spiritual life from him.

The third essential aspect of baptism is that we *"become sharers in all (Christ's) blessings"* (pg. 1307). Two of these blessings are regeneration (made into new people) and resurrection (just as Jesus was raised so too will we be).

Reflections: Baptism is one of the two sacraments of the Presbyterian Church. And as Presbyterians we can see the influence that Calvin has had on our church when we examine our understanding of baptism. First, we believe baptism marks our entry into the universal church of Jesus Christ; meaning that we baptize for the whole church and not just the Presbyterian Church. Second, we believe that baptism is a moment when we are made new and whole; meaning we are renewed people. Third, we do not believe that baptism is necessary for salvation; meaning that salvation is a gift of God and that baptism makes visible what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. I hope then, that the next time you witness a baptism, you will listen as the liturgy affirms these beliefs.

Questions:

1. Do you have any memory of your own baptism or the baptism of a child you knew? What stands out for you in that moment?
2. What do you think about the idea that in baptism we become new people?
3. What hope do you find in the idea that in baptism we are freed from sin...for all of time?