

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 15 – Part 2
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: In the last article, we covered three essential aspects of baptism: 1) that in baptism we are forever cleansed of sin 2) that in baptism we become new people 3) that in baptism we share in Christ's blessings (including resurrection and regeneration). In this portion of the chapter Calvin deals with a series of ongoing arguments about baptism.

The first argument concerns baptism and original sin. The Roman church claimed that baptism washes away original sin; original sin being used to describe the ongoing sinfulness of humanity which is rooted in the story of Adam and Eve's rebellion in the garden. Calvin disagrees. For him, even though baptism cleanses people from sin, it does not return them to some "pre-fall" state of perfection. Calvin does not believe this because if human beings were capable of being perfect, then there would be no need for Jesus Christ and his work on the cross.

The second argument concerns the worthiness of the one who baptizes. Some people had argued that if the one baptizing was less than perfect then the baptism didn't count. Calvin disagrees, stating that baptism is effective regardless of who administers it because *"it is to be received as from the hand of the Author himself (meaning from Jesus)"* (pg. 1314).

The third argument concerns whether baptism was effective if the person being baptized did not immediately repent of their sins. Some argued it was a waste of water, but Calvin believed otherwise. *"...yet that promise (of being forgiven in baptism), since it was of God, ever remained fixed and firm and trustworthy...even if all men are lost, Christ remains salvation"* (pg. 1317).

The fourth argument focused on the issue of people being rebaptized. In Calvin's day (as in our own), there were Reformers who argued that a Catholic baptism was not effective, and Catholics who argued that a Reformed baptism was not effective and the Anabaptists who argued that neither of these others was effective. Calvin argues that any baptism, since it is from Jesus is as good as any other baptism.

The fifth argument concerns the mode of baptism. Different churches argued for immersion, others for sprinkling and still others for poured water. Calvin said that it did not matter, because, again, it is from Christ and that is all that matters.

The sixth, and final argument, deals with women baptizing. In the Roman church, if there was an emergency (perhaps a child or adult near death), any person, including a woman, could baptize. Calvin, not only disapproved of emergency baptisms (they were not necessary because baptism was not essential for salvation), but also of women baptizing. He did so because it was, in his opinion, prohibited by Paul and by the early church.

Reflections: Once again, as 21st century Presbyterians, we are in considerable agreement with Calvin concerning baptism. We don't believe that original sin is wiped away by baptism, but that after baptism we are simply continually forgiven sinners. We don't believe that the perfection of the one baptizing effects the effectiveness of the sacrament. We believe any baptism offered in the name of the triune God is effective. We believe that any mode of baptism is appropriate. But we do disagree with Calvin on the issue of women baptizing. We believe any clergy, male or female can baptize.

Questions:

1. Which of these arguments about baptism have you ever heard discussed? What was the discussion?
2. What is your opinion on original sin and its relationship to baptism?
3. Do you think it matters how someone is baptized? Why or why not?