

“We Believe” - The Nicene Creed, the Church, and you

All-Ages Sunday School Winter/Spring 2021
Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA) Sierra Vista, AZ

“³⁷ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” ⁴⁰And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” ⁴¹So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. ⁴²And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” — Acts 2:37-42

Review:

The Nicene Creed is a confession of what ‘we’ believe as Christians. Since its completion in 381 AD, it has been continually used by Christ’s Church in worship.

By confessing the Blessed Trinity, we believe in one God in three persons; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the persons of the Godhead. This is a profound mystery of the faith. We have worked our way through what the Creed teaches about the Father and about the Son, and now we are considering the Holy Spirit.

We have considered who He is, and now we continue to look at what He does.

“... we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; ... ”

The placement of this statement is important. It comes on the heels of confessing “one holy catholic and apostolic church” because - in the words of John Calvin - “the Lord has only promised mercy within the communion of saints.”¹ The preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments belongs to the Holy Spirit’s work in the Church.

What is a Sacrament?

Christianity has two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. (Covenant Entry & Sustaining)

A Sacrament is a holy sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace. In every sacrament there is a spiritual relationship/sacramental union between the physical sign and the spiritual reality signified (WCF XXVII.1-2). Important for what the creed confesses: the sacramental union is so strong between the visible sign and the reality signified “that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other” (WCF 27.2 MESV). And so water baptism is for the remission of sin.

¹ Calvin, John 1541 Edition of the Institutes (Banner of Truth) p. 277

To separate the sign and thing signified leads to the Pentecostal error of looking for a second Spirit Baptism which must come after the first Water Baptism. To collapse the thing signified into the sign leads to the Roman error that amounts to little more than ministerial magic.

Not all who receive the sign receive the thing signified: Simon Magus in Acts 8:13, 18-24.

It is possible for the Lord's Table to not confer the thing which the sign signified: forgiveness of sin and spiritual nourishment on Christ. Instead, without faith the Supper can confer the exact opposite; it can make you weak and ill, and thus we hedge the table (1 Cor. 11:27-32).

The Sign and the Thing Signified

John 3:5 - *"Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'"* (see also v. 6-8)

1 Peter 3:21 - in reference to the ark saving 8 in the days of Noah, *"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, ..."*

For those who profess faith and are then baptized - whether that be in a credobaptist or paedobaptist church - there is an assumed temporal disconnect between the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into the individual's heart/ the cleansing by the blood of Christ and the washing by the water in the sign of Baptism.

And for baptizing Covenant Children there is still a temporal disconnect - it points forward, while 'believer's baptism' points backward.

But Baptism - ordinarily and ideally - is inseparable from the remission of sin.

And it is only that outpouring of the Holy Spirit and cleansing by the blood of Christ that brings the remission of sins. The thing signified in baptism is the only thing that can save sinful souls. There is one baptism, and baptism points to this one means of salvation. (see Titus 3:3-8)

[see also Heidelberg Catechism #65-74]

Asking for "re-baptism" in effect calls into question the graciousness of God's sovereign doing and it calls into question the "one baptism" that unites Christians (Eph. 4:5).

Notice, in Acts 8, Simon Magus is baptized after a false profession of faith - the falsehood of his profession becomes clear in his request to buy spiritual power and in his response to rebuke. But unlike Acts 2:38, Peter does not tell him to "repent and be baptized" - Simon is already baptized, so all he must do is "repent" (Acts 8:22). That is what he must urgently do for his own soul - that is what he must do to receive the thing already signified in the Covenant Sign.

Westminster Confession of Faith (Modern English Study Version) Chapter 27 - The Sacraments

1. Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the Covenant of Grace.^a They were directly instituted by God^b to represent Christ and his benefits and to confirm our relationship to him.^c They are also intended to make a visible distinction between those who belong to the church and the rest of the world,^d and solemnly to bind Christians to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.^e

^aRom. 4:11; Gen. 17:7, 10-11. ^bMatt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:23. ^cRom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12; 1 Cor 10:16; 1 Cor 11:25-26; Gal. 3:27. ^dEx. 12:48; Gen. 34:14; 1 Cor. 10:21. ^eRom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:27; 1 Pet. 3:21; 1 Cor. 10:16; 1 Cor. 5:7-8.

2. In every sacrament there is a spiritual relationship, or sacramental union, between the visible sign and the reality signified by it, and so it happens that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.^a

^aGen. 17:10; Matt. 26:27-28; 1 Cor. 10:16-18

3. The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments, rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them. Neither does the efficacy of a sacrament depend on the piety or intention of him who administers it,^a but rather on the work of the Spirit^b and on the word of institution, which contains (together with a precept authorizing its use) a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.^c

^aRom. 2:28-29; 1 Pet. 3:21. ^b1 Cor. 12:13. ^cMatt. 26:26-28; Luke 22:19-20; Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:26.

4. There are only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospel: baptism and the Lord's supper. Neither sacrament may be administered by any person except a minister of the Word, lawfully ordained.^a

^aMatt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:20,23; 1 Cor. 4:1; Eph. 4:11-12

5. With regard to the spiritual realities signified and exhibited, the sacraments of the Old Testament were essentially the same as those of the New Testament.^a

^a1 Cor. 10:1-4; Rom. 4:11; Col. 2:11-12

Belgic Confession (URCNA)

Article 34 - The Sacrament of Baptism

We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, in whom the law is fulfilled, has by his shed blood put an end to every other shedding of blood, which anyone might do or wish to do in order to atone or satisfy for sins.

Having abolished circumcision, which was done with blood, he established in its place the sacrament of baptism. By it we are received into God's church and set apart from all other people and alien religions, that we may be dedicated entirely to him, bearing his mark and sign. It also witnesses to us that he will be our God forever, since he is our gracious Father.

Therefore he has commanded that all those who belong to him be baptized with pure water "in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit."^a In this way he signifies to us that just as water washes away the dirt of the body when it is poured on us and also is seen on the body of the baptized when it is sprinkled on him, so too the blood of Christ does the same thing internally, in the soul, by the Holy Spirit. It washes and cleanses it from its sins and transforms us from being the children of wrath into the children of God.

This does not happen by the physical water but by the sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God, who is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, who is the devil, and to enter the spiritual land of Canaan. So ministers, as far as their work is concerned, give us the sacrament and what is visible, but our Lord gives what the sacrament signifies — namely the invisible gifts and graces; washing, purifying, and cleansing our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving us true assurance of his fatherly goodness; clothing us with the "new man" and stripping off the "old," with all its works.^b

For this reason we believe that anyone who aspires to reach eternal life ought to be baptized only once without ever repeating it — for we cannot be born twice. Yet this baptism is profitable not only when the water is on us and when we receive it but throughout our entire lives.

For that reason we detest the error of the Anabaptists who are not content with a single baptism once received and also condemn the baptism of the children of believers. We believe our children ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as little children were circumcised in Israel on the basis of the same promises made to our children.

And truly, Christ has shed his blood no less for washing the little children of believers than he did for adults.

Therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of what Christ has done for them, just as the Lord commanded in the law that by offering a lamb for them the sacrament of the suffering and death of Christ would be granted them shortly after their birth. This was the sacrament of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, baptism does for our children what circumcision did for the Jewish people. That is why Paul calls baptism the "circumcision of Christ."^c

^aMatt. 28:19. ^bCol. 3:9-10. ^cCol. 2:11