

Week #8b:

John Calvin and the Anabaptists on the Relation Between

- **Covenant,**
- **Confession of Faith,**
- **the Holiness of the Church and**
- **the Nature of Baptism**

Progress of the Reformation

Luther—reformation of doctrine

Arndt and Gerhard—reformation of life and piety

Calvin—reformation of the church and sacramental theology

Covenant and Baptism

Covenant

Anabaptists: The old and new covenants were fundamentally different in nature,

- one based on law and provisional, with not all members of the covenant community by physical birth being regenerate and confessing the faith;
- the other being based on grace and being evidence of inward regeneration [spiritual birth], with all members of the covenant community having saving knowledge of God and confessing the faith.
 - Heb. 8:11 is often cited in this connection (concerns God's declaration that he will supply in the future what was missing under the old covenant: "No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord' because they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest.")

One should therefore believe that

- the coming of Christ marked a decisive break with the past and with the old covenant.
- the ceremonies of the old covenant were merely signs and figures of what was to come, but are now abrogated and obsolete.
- under the old covenant, the people of Israel was an ethnic national entity, but the New Testament Church contains only mature, rational adults who are able to hear and understand the Word and respond to it by way of self-conscious commitment and a break with the past, by which they voluntarily subordinate themselves to the discipline of the local church.

Calvin: No—it is the same covenant in the OT and NT though different administration; still there is a unity and continuity between the Church and Israel:

- same God and same teachings about God;
- same fundamental relationship between God and His people, in which Christ is promised as mediator;
- the covenant relationship is extended and based upon not the people's own merits, but on God's mercy and his crediting of faith as righteousness, by which one becomes able to share in everything God has promised;

- similar signs are introduced under the covenant to seal and confirm the promises made under the covenant;
 - the benefits of the covenant not available to us unless we are united to God through faith, which is the work of the Spirit;
- same hope of heaven and eternal life with God (what was given to Israel was more than just a promise of land and material blessings)
- The OT is thus not a separate, self-contained entity, but looks to the future and remains edifying today for the people of God.
- Law and Gospel are also not to be strictly opposed (cf. Luther), but rather the Gospel is promised in the Law.

Implications of One Covenant for Baptism (Calvin)

- Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575; successor to Zwingli at Zurich) and Calvin thought that the Anabaptist account of baptism as adult profession was
 - too individualistic,
 - too sectarian (rending the fabric of the church through rebaptism) and
 - too inattentive to Christian nurture (no account of development into commitment)
 to be of any use.
- Bullinger and Calvin believed that there was a single covenant relationship with God (though the mode of the covenant's administration and its external signs changed). There is thus a certain continuity of God's promises to his chosen people which persist throughout history.
 - The promise to Abraham (Gen. 17:7 "to you and your children").
 - Note that children are included in the covenant, with circumcision being given as the sign of this in Gen. 17:10-13, showing to the assembled people that God has promised to be God not only to them but also *to their children*.
 - God promises to renew the hearts of his people (Jer. 31:31-34) and send his Spirit upon them, acts which are fulfilled under the new covenant, which explicitly reaffirms that these are part of the promise God has made to believers *and their children* (Acts 2:39).
 - It is on the basis of this covenant promise that believing parents are required to instruct their children in the faith, so that the children may in time own the covenant themselves and appropriate its benefits by faith.
 - In the new covenant, the sign of membership in the covenant community is baptism (cf. Col. 2:11-13: both circumcision and baptism point to the forgiveness of sins and renewal of life that is offered under the covenant to those who believe) and the household continues to have a primacy and solidarity that significantly defines the child's subsequent identity (making it possible for the child to understand, receive and respond to the promises of God).
 - The child under the covenant is therefore in a different position than one not under the covenant (cf. 1 Cor. 7:14).
 - One remains under the covenant until one repudiates the latter.

Significance of Baptism (Calvin)

- Baptism is a visible sign that we have been received into the society of the Church and signifies forgiveness through participation in Christ's death and resurrection; engrafted into Christ through faith, we receive these things and are adopted as God's children.
- Regardless of when we are baptized, the promise associated with baptism (that our sins are forgiven by Christ's death and resurrection) remains valid and sufficient for all our sins (sins committed at every stage of life). He leads us to the reality signified in baptism and effectively performs what baptism symbolizes.
- The separation in time of promise and its realization in repentance and faith does not weaken the promise; instead the eventual realization of the promise shows that the promise was true. Circumcision was related to conversion of heart in precisely the same way and did not need to be repeated at conversion.

The Church

The Holiness of the Church

Anabaptists:

- Members of the New Testament Church are called to live a life of
 - imitating and following after Christ in his suffering,
 - bearing his Cross while being persecuted for righteousness,
 - displaying the fruits of faith, while rejecting all worldliness and daily dying to self.
- Those who depart from this lifestyle are to be invited to repentance and if they do not, they are to be placed under the ban (a kind of disciplinary excommunication limiting communion with and assistance from church members).
- Outside this pilgrim community of the faithful who have submitted to rebaptism and endure hardship there is no salvation.

Calvin:

- Defects in the Church require brotherly correction, not assailing the peace of the Church by schism (thus falling away from the communion of the saints).
- Furthermore there is no wholly pure fellowship to be found, since every Christian fellowship is composed of persons (including oneself!) who are not yet wholly pure.
- Therefore just as a person is not to be utterly condemned for a single deed, so also one should not think the Church to be beyond hope because of its discernible defects.
 - Surely the Word and sacraments were instituted by Christ so that the members of the Church might receive the forgiveness of sins and move forward into greater faith and a holier life, so why should a Church that possesses this means of grace be abandoned?

For Calvin, the visible church is not a static concept but a dynamic reality—the wicked may enter in and the externally moral may be lost.

Marks of the Church:

“Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution” (public edification should proceed decently and in order)

- Wherever the preaching of the Gospel is reverently heard and the sacraments not neglected, it will bear fruit (church’s daily advance in holiness, though not yet perfect).
- Defective churches are therefore not to be forsaken or spurned, causing a breach in unity.
- One should instead exercise charitable judgment, recognizing as members of the church all “those who by confession of faith, by example of life, and by partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ with us.” (Hypocrites—have the name and appearance only but are ambitious, greedy, envious, slanderous, etc.--reckoned to belong to the church until rejected by public judgment.)

Visible vs. Invisible Church Distinction

(Contrast Lutherans on baptismal grace/confirmation?)

Visible=profess to worship the one God and Christ

Invisible=communion of the saints=what the church fundamentally is.

- The church originates and is grounded in divine election
- Since the invisible church/communion of the saints is contained within the visible church, we ought not to leave the latter or rend the latter by schism
- The church’s permanence lies in the fact of the presence of the communion of the saints within the visible church

Election, the Visible Church (Visible Aspect of the Covenant) and the Invisible Church (Invisible Aspect of the Covenant)

- Bullinger and Calvin rejected the Anabaptist assumption that baptism could serve as an external evidence of inward renewal (making the local church a confessing body of redeemed persons).
 - After all, don't people sometimes make confessions of faith hypocritically or as a result of peer pressure?
 - Augustine was right then, Bullinger and Calvin argued, to emphasize that things are often not as they seem to be and we will never truly be able to understand individual's hearts and final destinies until God separates the present mixed body of the visible church into faithful and unfaithful persons at the Last Judgment.
- God's electing purposes are worked out in time according to God's own schedule and much of this remains hidden from us. Someone God has chosen to draw to himself may presently be a notorious sinner or hypocrite; by looking at an individual's confession and life, we can never know with certainty whether that individual will be saved.
- Baptism is therefore not a declaration that the person baptized is regenerate (as Anabaptists wrongly imagined). In fact, baptism is not about that particular individual at all. It is a declaration of the promises of the covenant that summons

- all the elect to repentance and faith and confirms and strengthens them in this faith, while standing over against all those who, through unbelief, will not accept the promise as a word of judgment and condemnation.
- The visible church is thus not identical with the invisible church of all who are elect and will be saved.
 - At the same time, the calling of the elect to repentance and faith takes place through the ordinary, tangible structures of the visible church (preaching of the Word and administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper).
 - The visible church thus has a role to play in the outworking of God's hidden work of drawing a people to himself (the invisible church of all the elect, sown in among the nominal and hypocritical believers within the congregations that comprise the visible church).

The Sacraments

What Is a Sacrament?

An aid to faith related to the preaching of the Gospel=

- an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith”
- “a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign”

We need outward helps (e.g. preaching and the sacraments) to beget and increase faith within us and advance it to its goal. Knowing our weakness, God provides these for us to increase and strengthen our faith

(Calvin also recognizes that the sacrament allows humans to demonstrate piety toward God in gratitude for what they have received from God, bearing witness to their faith before men and pledging themselves to purity and holiness of life)

- A sacrament is added to a preceding promise to confirm and seal the promise of spiritual blessings, to make this promise more evident to us, leading us upward by these earthly elements so as to go beyond the visible sign and arrive at a devout contemplation of Christ (who presents himself and his benefits to us in the sacrament), so that our faith is strengthened and we may lay hold of the promise with sure faith.
- This strengthening of faith occurs not by virtue of the Word and sign alone but because the Spirit opens and illuminates the heart so that it can receive the things signified with faith, be moved to love them, and have sure persuasion and certain confidence that God has spoken truthfully and will do what He has promised.
- The sacrament requires preaching of the promise to beget faith; the word which is preached must explain the visible sign.
- The sacraments do not automatically confer grace but rather hold forth Christ as the object of faith. The visible sign is of no help where faith is not present, for unbelief is a rejection of the promise and the testimony concerning God's grace. Those who have not received (or will not receive) the token of the promise as a result of unbelief are excluded from the promise itself. In this case, the Lord's presence brings judgment and wrath of God upon the unbelieving.

OT and Sacraments

The sacramental actions of the OT, e.g.,

- circumcision [=a sign of the righteousness of faith, i.e. that their faith is counted by God as righteousness, for both Abraham and Paul],
- purifications [sign of uncleanness removed] and
- sacrifices [satisfaction for sin must be made through the mediation of a high priest])

all point to Christ (OT—foreshadow him as the promised one; NT—more fully attest him as already given and revealed).

The matter of the sacraments is the same, i.e. God's revelation of his mercy and forgiveness through Christ, which in the OT is looked for and in the NT is given.

In Christ is given both the Father's kindness and the gifts of the Spirit.

Testimony of the Spirit

Spirit, as means of union with the ascended Christ, seals the promises to us, engraving them upon our hearts

- Spirit illuminates the mind and heart so faith can arise.
 - Spirit associated with calling, which is the outworking in time of divine election
 - Spirit “the inner teacher by whose effort the promise of salvation penetrates into our minds...faith itself has no other source than the Spirit”
- Spirit allows one to participate in Christ and arrive at a certain faith (confidence that one has been adopted as a child of God), so that one tastes and experiences Christ's benefits, one's heart becomes inflamed with the love of God and one is ruled and moved to the good by God's action.

Calvin's Account of Infant Baptism

That baptism is required is made clear in Scripture, but its mode and subjects are not so clearly and directly specified yet may be discerned by inference from the nature and broader context of the rite (cf. women being admitted to the Lord's Supper yet there is no direct command concerning this in Scripture; it is inferred from the nature and broader context of the rite). Strangers to the covenant are clearly received into the community of faith and baptized upon prior instruction and confession of faith; for those who are heirs of the covenant promises, there is however, another way to indicate reception into the community of faith.

The promise made to Abraham, his faith being counted as righteousness by God's mercy, is also extended to his children. Since one becomes like Abraham by faith, not merely through natural descent, this same promise belongs to those who have faith and their children. See Gen. 12:3; 17:7; Acts 2:39. The children of believing parents are therefore heirs of the covenant and differ from the children of the impious in this respect (cf. 1 Cor. 7:14).

The external sign that was appended to the promise (as a kind of seal, to certify and confirm the promise) was circumcision. This covenant promise of adoption by God and eternal life remains the same and is not abrogated or made void by the coming of Christ. The external administration of the covenant nonetheless changes, so that a new external sign is added in place of circumcision, which nonetheless performs similar functions, i.e. visibly indicating entry into the people of God (visible church) and consecration to God and providing assurance that all who are God's people (=elect in Christ and members of the invisible church) are recipients of God's promises, adopted as children of God and heirs of eternal life, and will through faith enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

In baptism, the sins inherited by those who are to be saved is washed away by Christ's death; by this same washing of water with the Word, such persons enter into new life through participation in Christ's life. In this incipient new life, the seeds of faith are present and will later find external expression through confession of faith. (Thus, although the internal reality and the external sign must always be held together, the external expression of the internal reality not always be observed before the external sign is administered. The same was true in the OT in regard to circumcision, which signified faith and repentance, realities that would only receive external expression at a time after the sign was administered.)

This new life (regeneration) is not to be limited to a single event (as in later Pietism and evangelicalism, which thought of regeneration in terms of a single, emotion-laden turning point which could be identified in public testimony and was associated with visibly discernible ethical conversion) but extends across the whole of life to include forgiveness of future sins and one's subsequent progression toward greater understanding of the promise and holiness of life (sanctification).

This change occurs wherever those who are to be saved are baptized and is part of the outworking of God's plan to save a people for Himself through divine election. Since, however, we are unable to discern who is the object of God's electing work and who is not, we must exercise charitable judgment. Just as we know that not all who make professions of faith actually belong to Christ (for hypocrisy and insincerity cannot always be detected) and yet we charitably presume that those who profess to be repentant, have faith in Christ and worship God are members of Christ's Body and heirs of his promises, so also we charitably presume that their children are heirs together with their parents of

these things and may properly be baptized (confirming and sealing to them what is already true in the promise of God). This judgment may of course be mistaken (perhaps the parents are hypocrites rather than believers or that the child in time will repudiate the promises made under the covenant through unbelief). There is, however, simply no way around this problem, given the inability of creatures to infallibly discern the condition of another's inner life.