

Baptismal Regeneration and the Westminster Confession of Faith

By D. Patrick Ramsey

INTRODUCTION

What does baptism do? Unfortunately, a common answer will not be found among the different branches of Christianity. At one end of the spectrum are those who make much of baptism in that it is a converting ordinance. At the other end are those who claim that baptism is a mere sign of our salvation and profession of faith.

In a stimulating essay, the late evangelical Patriotic and Reformation scholar, David F. Wright asserted that the Westminster Confession of Faith, which according to Benjamin Warfield holds the preeminence among the Reformed Confessions,¹ teaches that baptism conveys converting grace.² Thus, for Wright, there is at least a strand, indeed a significant strand, of Reformed thought at one end of the spectrum, holding to baptismal regeneration.

Though his conclusion is provocative, Wright's method of study is to be commended and emulated. David Gebbie is certainly correct to consider his essay a model for Westminster studies because of the way he utilizes primary sources to explain the wording that is finally adopted by the Assembly.³ In his essay Wright addresses a number of issues pertaining to baptism, but with respect to efficacy he draws upon the Minutes, the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Directory for Public Worship to prove his point.

His first line of argumentation is from the Minutes of the Westminster Assembly, specifically from a brief record of a debate between Jeremiah Whitaker and Herbert Palmer. Whitaker argues that baptism exhibits and confers the grace that it signifies, while Palmer speaks of baptism as a seal and denies that it imparts converting grace. Wright tentatively postulates from this brief record that the draft before the Assembly, which would eventually become WCF 28.6, at this point did

not contain the language "not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred." The unstated conclusion seems to be that the Assembly's later adoption of the language advanced by Whitaker suggests that the Assembly sided with Whitaker and not Palmer.

A second argument is drawn from what Wright considers to be the Confession's central affirmation of the efficacy of baptism: "the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost (28.6)."⁴ Although this statement is surrounded by numerous qualifications, none of them detract or diminish the core declaration. In fact, they only serve to highlight it. Therefore, Wright concludes, "The Westminster divines viewed baptism as the instrument and occasion of regeneration by the Spirit, of the remission of sins, of ingrafting into Christ (cf. 28.1). The

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1. Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (repr., Cherry Hill, N.J.: Mack Publishing Company, 1972) 58.

2. Contra William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (1862; repr., Carlisle, Pa.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989) 241–281; Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940) 44–52; Cornelius P. Venema, "Sacraments and Baptism in the Reformed Confessions," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 11 (2000): 80; David Dickson, *TRUTHS VICTORY OVER ERROR* (Edinburgh, 1684) 282.

3. David Douglas Gebbie, "Review of *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*," *Haddington House Journal* 7 (2005): 134.

4. David F. Wright, "Baptism at the Westminster Assembly," *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, ed. Ligon Duncan (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2003) 168.

Confession teaches baptismal regeneration” (Wright, “Baptism at the Westminster Assembly,” 169).

Further support for this conclusion is gleaned from the Directory for Public Worship. Wright notes that the model prayer before the act of baptizing includes the petition that the inward baptism of the Spirit would join the outward baptism of water so that the child might be planted into the likeness of the death and resurrection of Christ (Wright, “Baptism at the Westminster Assembly,” 169).

Thus, on the basis of various primary sources, Wright claims that the Confession espouses baptismal regeneration. He acknowledges that this efficacy is limited to worthy receivers, but stresses that such a limitation should not be used “to emasculate its vigorous primary affirmation” (Wright, “Baptism at the Westminster Assembly,” 170).

Employing the right method, however, does not insure a correct outcome. Thus, this paper, while adopting the same approach, will question Wright’s conclusion. In so doing, we will seek to demonstrate that the words “exhibit” and “confer” in the context of baptism do not necessarily imply a conveyance of initial grace. Then we will attempt to establish that the Confession should not be interpreted as teaching baptismal regeneration because such an interpretation does not comport with the teaching of the Confession as a whole. Finally, we will address the issue of infants and baptismal regeneration.

ON THE WORDS “EXHIBIT” AND “CONFER”

The Westminster Standards use the words “exhibit” and “confer” to explain sacramental efficacy. Sacraments as holy ordinances instituted by Christ and effectual means of salvation are said to “exhibit . . . the benefits of [Christ’s] mediation” and to apply “the benefits of

the New Covenant,”⁵ while baptism is specifically said to really exhibit and confer the grace promised (WCF 28.6. Cf. WLC 167).

It will not be disputed that the word “exhibit,” which as Wright has demonstrated elsewhere means to impart and bestow,⁶ coupled with “confer” denotes the concept of conveyance (Wright, “Baptism at the Westminster Assembly,” 168). Undoubtedly, the Westminster Standards teach that both sacraments convey grace. The precise issue, however, that needs to be addressed is if these words *necessarily* denote the conveyance of first grace in baptism. And it is plausible that they do for two reasons.

First, baptism conveys regeneration because it exhibits that which it signifies. Whitaker makes this point against Palmer as recorded in the Minutes. He argues, citing Chamier and the French Confession, that the Reformed affirm that baptism is more than a sign and seal because “the grace that is signified is exhibited.”⁷ It is for this reason that the use of the word “exhibit” in conjunction with the Lord’s Supper does not necessarily imply that it does not denote the conveyance of first grace in baptism. Besides the fact that it was argued during the time of the Assembly that the Lord’s Supper is a converting ordinance,⁸ it could be maintained, as Whitaker appears to do, that “exhibit” refers to converting grace in baptism because it, and not the Lord’s Supper, signifies regeneration (See WLC 177).

Second, the words “sign” and “seal” are sometimes used in opposition to “confer” and “exhibit” in order to reject baptismal regeneration. In the Minutes, Herbert Palmer, who denies the conferral of first grace in baptism, uses the word “seal,” rather than “exhibit,” to describe that baptism is more than a naked sign.⁹ Daniel Featley is even more explicit. He makes a sharp and precise distinction between sealing and conferring grace, with the latter alone referring to initial grace. In answering the Arminian argument that grace can be lost because some infants who receive baptismal grace later depart from the faith, Featley writes:

Secondly, we answer: That although in a good sense a child may be said to be put into the state of *Grace* and *Salvation*, because thereby the infant is admitted into the Church, and participeth of the *meanes of salvation*; yet, if wee speake properly and precisely, the *Sacraments* seale, and not conferre grace; or, as the Church of *England* speaketh by her learned Apologist, *doe not begin, but rather continue and confirme our incorporation, by Christ.*¹⁰

5. Larger Catechism (WLC) 162; Shorter Catechism (WSC) 92. Cf. WCF 27.3.

6. David Wright, “Infant baptism and the Christian community in Bucer,” *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community* (ed. David F. Wright; Cambridge: C.U.P., 1994) 99.

7. Chad Van Dixhoorn, “Reforming the Reformation: Theological Debate at the Westminster Assembly, 1643–1652” (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 2004) 6.235.

8. See William Prynne, *A Vindication of foure Serious Questions* (London, 1645), 40–48; *SUSPENSION SUSPENDED* (London, 1646) 24–38.

9. Van Dixhoorn, “Reforming the Reformation,” 6.236. Cf. Herbert Palmer, *An Endeavour of Making the Principles of Christian Religion, namely the Creed, the ten Commandments, the LORDS Prayer, and the Sacraments, plaine and easie* (London, 1645) 40.

10. Daniel Featley, *A Second Parallel* (London, 1626) 87.

Thus, the fact that the Standards use the words “exhibit” and “confer” in addition to “sign” and “seal” provides some credence to the belief that they teach sacramental or at the very least baptismal regeneration. Whatever level of credibility this argument carries, however, is effectively undermined by George Gillespie and Samuel Rutherford’s discussions on the exhibitiv nature of the sacraments.

As a Scottish commissioner, Gillespie was not a voting member of the Westminster Assembly. Nevertheless, he played an important and influential role in the formulation of both the Directory for Public Worship and the Confession of Faith. Active behind the scenes, as well as often taking center stage—winning the title of most outspoken Scot,¹¹ which is no small feat—Gillespie diligently worked to produce documents that could be approved in his homeland, until his departure in May, 1647, after the completion of the proofs for the Confession.¹² He was a member of the sub-committee that drafted the Directory for Public Worship, and given the specific task, along with his fellow Scots, to write the sections on public prayer and the administration of the sacraments (Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly*, 214–215). Together with Robert Baillie, “Gillespie introduced the Directory to the Scottish Assembly in Edinburgh in 1645, and he presented the Confession of Faith to the Assembly in Edinburgh in 1647 and saw its formal approval.”¹³

In light of Gillespie’s influence, his discussion of sacramental language during the sitting of the Assembly is highly significant and instructive. Addressing whether the Lord’s Supper is a converting ordinance, Gillespie asserts that the Reformed deny that the sacraments are instrumental means for conveying the first grace. Indeed, he boldly states that, “this is so well known to all who have studied the sacramentarian controversy, that I should not need to prove it.”¹⁴ After supporting his point from the writings of Calvin, Bullinger, Ursinus, Musculus, Bucer, Honnius, Aretius, Vossius and from several Reformed confessions, including the Synod of Dort, Gillespie confronts the objection that sacraments are “Exhibitiv signs, so that the thing signified is given and exhibited to the soul” (*Aaron’s Rod*, 233). He writes:

I answer, That exhibition which they speak of, is not the giving of grace where it is not (as is manifest by the afore-quoted testimonies), but an exhibition to believers—a real effectual lively application of Christ, and of all his benefits, to every one that believeth; for the staying, strengthening, confirming, and comforting of the soul.... Our divines do not say that the sacraments are

exhibitiv ordinances, wherein grace is communicated to those who have none of it, to unconverted or unbelieving persons.... Protestant writers do not only oppose the *opus operatum*, and the *causalitas physica* and *insita*, but they oppose (as is manifest by the testimonies already cited) all casuality, or working of the first grace of conversion and faith in or by the sacraments, supposing always a man to be a believer, and within the covenant of grace before the sacrament, and that he is not made such, nor translated to the state of grace in or by the sacrament.¹⁵

Like his fellow Scotsman, Samuel Rutherford was an influential non-voting member of the Assembly.¹⁶ In opposition to those who taught the sacraments only declare things to be what they are, Rutherford emphatically asserted a real exhibition of grace in the sacraments. Indeed, “if God give not, and really produce, conferre and exhibit grace ... at the due and right use of the Sacrament, the Sacrament is a naked sign.”¹⁷

Thus, according to Rutherford the sacraments do not merely signify and seal grace and pardon, they really exhibit and give grace and pardon. However, the grace conferred is not converting grace because what is given is “a stronger measure of faith, and assurance of remission of sinnes ... grace and pardon in a further degree, and a new measure of assurance to the conscience which there was not before” (Rutherford, *Due Right*, 217). Hence, Rutherford says a sacrament is “an exhibitiv seale.”¹⁸

11. R.S. Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985) 116.

12. Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards* (London, 1883; repr., Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1992) 429.

13. L.I. Hodges, “George Gillespie,” *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology* (eds. David F. Wright et. al.; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1993) 359.

14. George Gillespie, *Aaron’s Rod Blossoming* (London, 1646; repr., Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1985) 229.

15. *Aaron’s Rod Blossoming*, 229. See also p. 237. On p. 248, Gillespie says that the application of Christ in and through the sacrament does not infer conversion as the effect of the application.

16. Guy M. Richard, “Samuel Rutherford’s supralapsarianism revealed: a key to the lapsarian position of the Westminster Confession of Faith?” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 59 (2006): 36. See also the reprint in this issue of *The Confessional Presbyterian*, 162.

17. Samuel Rutherford, *THE Due right of Presbyteries* (London, 1644) 217.

18. *Due Right*, 214. Similarly, Edward Reynolds connects the exhibitiv function of sacraments to their nature as seals. He says a sacrament is a sign to represent and a seal to exhibit. See his, *Meditations on the Holy Sacrament of the Lord’s Last Supper*, vol. 3 of works (1826; repr., Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1999) 84.

It is apparent, therefore, that the words “exhibit” and “confer” in conjunction with baptism do not *necessarily* denote the conveyance of initial grace. If they did, Wright’s argument would be cogent. But by failing to note that these same words are used by some to refer to sealing/sanctifying grace in baptism, his argument becomes suspect.

In light of this, how then might we understand the debate between Whitaker and Palmer? It is likely that Whitaker, in support of Wright’s argument, does believe that the use of the word “exhibit” by the Reformed in conjunction with baptism must refer to the conveyance of first grace; and that Palmer is thus arguing against a form of baptismal regeneration by using sign and seal language.¹⁹ But contra Wright, it seems more likely that the draft before the Assembly at the time of the Whitaker/Palmer exchange did contain the exhibit language. For in the midst of the debate over this language, Palmer says that the proposition before the Assembly is not proper in Whitaker’s sense (Van Dixhoorn, 6.236). In other words, it seems that Palmer is not objecting to exhibit and confer language per se but to how it is understood by Whitaker. And since there is no reason to believe that Palmer, who affirmed that there was no

nakedness in a seal, would have objected to this language as used by Gillespie and Rutherford, its adoption by the Standards does not imply, as Wright would have us believe, that the divines sided with Whitaker and affirmed baptismal regeneration.

REASONS BAPTISMAL REGENERATION DOES NOT
COMPORT WITH THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS
1. *The Nature and Purpose of Baptism*

Unquestionably, the Westminster Standards emphasize the sealing function of the sacraments. Each time a sacrament is defined, generally or specifically, its sealing nature and purpose is mentioned (See WCF 27.1; WCF 28.1; WCF 20.1; WLC 162; WLC 168; WSC 92). In one place, seal is used as a synonym for sacrament (WCF 30.3). A similarity or agreement between baptism and the Lord’s Supper is that both are seals of the same covenant (WLC 176). Interestingly, the sections on baptism contain more references to the concept of seal and confirmation than those on the Lord’s Supper (See WCF 28.1; WLC 165; WLC 167; WLC 177; WSC 94).

Other documents connected to the Assembly echo this same emphasis. Before baptism is administered, the Directory for Public Worship directs the minister to instruct the congregation that baptism is a seal of the covenant of grace. The model prayer before baptism requests God to make the infant’s baptism a seal of his adoption, remission of sins, regeneration and eternal life and of all other promises of the covenant of grace. According to an ordinance on the Lord’s Supper, issued by Parliament in 1645, people seeking admittance to the Table are required to know “That the Sacraments are seales of the Covenant of Grace in the blood of Christ.”²⁰ Numerous members of the Assembly in their own writings affirm that baptism is a seal. To mention just a few: Twisse, Cawdrey, Marshall, Carter, and Goodwin.²¹

This united testimony and emphasis on depicting baptism as a seal is significant because the purpose of a seal, according to the Standards, is to confirm interest in Christ (WCF 27.1), and to strengthen a believer’s faith and all other graces (WLC 162; cf. WCF 14.1). Similar comments are also found among the divines. Palmer says that God designed sacraments “to confirme and increase our faith and grace,”²² while Samuel Rutherford notes the purpose of a sacrament is to strengthen and confirm staggering faith.²³ Richard Vines affirms that both sacraments are seals of the covenant. Baptism seals “engrafting and implanting unto Christ” whereas the Lord’s Supper seals “fellowship with, and building up in Christ.”²⁴ Both sacraments are to be applied only

19. I say a form of baptismal regeneration because Whitaker denies that grace is conferred *ex opere operato*. Rather, he believes that when baptism is lawfully received, “God doth promise to bestow the inward,” Van Dixhoorn, “Reforming the Reformation,” 6.236.

20. An ORDINANCE OF THE LORDS and COMMONS Assembled in PARLIAMENT Together with Rules and Directions concerning Suspension from the Sacrament of The Lords Supper In cases of Ignorance and Scandall (London, 1645) 4. George Gillespie comments: “The sacraments are seals of the righteousness of faith, or covenant of grace. . . . This truly hath been justly accounted so necessary, that both the Houses of Parliament, after consultation had with the Assembly of Divines, did, by the ordinance dated Oct. 20, 1645, appoint that whoever doth not know that the sacraments are seals of the covenant of grace, shall not be admitted to the Lord’s supper, but shall be suspended from it as an ignorant person,” “A Treatise of Miscellany Questions,” *The Works of George Gillespie* (1846; repr., Edmonton, AB: Still Water Revival Books, 1991) 2.37.

21. William Twisse, *A Brief Catecheticall Exposition of Christian Doctrine* (London, 1645) 5; Daniel Cawdrey, *The Inconsistencie of the Independent Way* (London, 1651) 196; Stephen Marshall, *A Sermon of the Baptizing of Infants* (London, 1644) 8; William Carter, *The Covenant of God with Abraham Opened* (London, 1654) 78–79; Thomas Goodwin, “Christ Set Forth,” *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (1861–1866; repr., Eureka, CA: Tanski Publications, 1996) 4.14, 41–42; 9.51–52, 362.

22. Palmer, *Principles of Christian Religion*, 39.

23. Rutherford, “Ane Catachisme Containing The Soume of Christian Religion,” in Alexander F. Mitchell, *Catechisms of the Second Reformation* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1886) 218.

24. Richard Vines, *A Treatise of the Right Administration, and Receiving of the Sacrament of the Lords-Supper* (London, 1657) 256.

to those in Covenant “for their certioration and comfort” (Vines, 256).

Confirmation and conversion are two distinct functions, and so confirming grace is to be distinguished from converting grace. Although, as Richard Vines grants, confirming and converting grace may be the same in substance, even as every degree of heat is of the same nature as the first degree, there is still a difference between first coming to Christ and being strengthened and confirmed in Christ (Vines, 259–260). Since the Word fulfills both functions (Cf. WCF 14.1), it is possible that a sacrament could do so as well.²⁵ Nevertheless, if baptism is divinely designed for sealing and confirming then one key implication would be that it is not a converting ordinance because sealing and confirming presuppose the existence of that which is being sealed and confirmed.²⁶

As mentioned previously, Daniel Featley observed that sacraments are properly and precisely seals and therefore they do not begin our incorporation into Christ but rather continue and confirm it. Expounding this point further, he writes, “The *Sacrament* is a *seale* of the *Covenant*, the conditions are supposed to be drawn and assented unto before the seale be put to the instrument. The *Seale* without the *Covenant* is not available.”²⁷

Similarly, Samuel Rutherford says that the true and formal effect of a sacrament is to seal and confirm which is “but a legall strengthening of a right, and not the adding of any new thing” (*Due Right*, 213). Consequently:

Baptisme is not that whereby we are entred into Christs mysticall and invisible body as such, for it is presupposed we be members of Christs body, and our sinnes pardoned already, before baptism comes to bee a seale of sinnes pardoned . . . Baptisme as it is such is a seal, and a seal as a seal addeth no new lands or goods to the man to whom the Charter and seale is given, but only doth legally confirme him in the right of such lands given to the man by the Prince or State, yet this hindereth not but baptisme is a reall, legall seale, legally confirming the man in his actual and visible profession of Christ, remission of sinnes, regeneration (*Due Right*, 211).

Notice Rutherford says that regeneration is confirmed in baptism. Or as he says elsewhere, “Regeneration is sealed in baptisme, and Christ given as sealing and confirming Regeneration.”²⁸ Since a seal adds nothing new, baptism is not the instrument and occasion of regeneration, but the instrument and occasion of the legal confirmation of regeneration. This should not be

construed to mean, however, that baptism does not give something that was not there before. Rutherford is adamant that baptism exhibits and confers grace, which implies in one sense something new is given, viz. a fuller measure of grace. The point is that what is given is of the same nature of what one already possesses. Thus, in saying nothing new is given, Rutherford is simply asserting that initial or converting grace is not conveyed via the sacraments (*Due Right*, 217–218).

George Gillespie believes the Reformed have consistently taught that sacraments are not converting ordinances because God instituted them as sealing ordinances. They are, therefore, designed “not to give, but to testify what is given, not to make, but confirm saints” (Gillespie, *Aaron’s Rod*, 229). Or as Walaeus, one of many Reformed theologians cited as evidence, asserted against Papiests and some Lutherans, “sacraments do instrumentally confirm and increase faith and regeneration, but not begin nor work faith and regeneration where they are not” (*Aaron’s Rod*, 232).

Thus, when the Confession’s statements on the efficacy of baptism are read in light of its teaching on the nature and purpose of the sacraments, Wright’s contention that they advocate a form of baptismal regeneration is, at the very least, mitigated. For a sacrament designed to confirm and not make saints does not exhibit regenerating grace.

2. *The Relationship between the Word and Sacrament*

The Westminster Standards teach that God uses the Scriptures to convert sinners. The faith, whereby sinners are enabled to savingly believe the Gospel is “ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word” (WCF 14.1). The reading but especially the preaching of the Word is “an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners” (WSC 89). In fact, the ability to convince and convert is evidence Scripture is the word of God (WLC 4).

25. William Prynne makes this argument. See his *Vindication*, 41.

26. See e.g. the note on Romans 4:11 in the Dutch Annotations, a work greatly admired by many Westminster divines as evidenced by a notice before the title page dated 1648 by Henry Elsyng, clerk of Parliament. Elsyng indicates that Parliament was assured by many of the divines sitting in the assembly at Westminster that the translation of the Dutch Annotations into English would be of great use and benefit for the promotion of piety.

27. Featley, *A Second Parallel*, 87. See also Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship* (1648; repr., Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996) 293–294; Cawdrey, *The Inconsistencie of the Independent Way*, 196.

28. Samuel Rutherford, *THE DIVINE RIGHT OF Church-Government AND Excommunication* (London, 1645) 523.

That the Standards do not explicitly relate the work of conversion to the sacraments may be significant, particularly when considered against the background of the writings of the members of the Assembly. Richard Vines approvingly cites the teaching of Whitaker,²⁹ namely that the Word and sacrament are instruments of grace. The difference between the two is that “the Word begins and works grace in the heart (*For faith comes by hearing*) but the Sacrament is objected to the eye, and doth not begin the work of grace, but nourishes and increases it, for faith is not begotten by the Sacraments, but only augmented.”³⁰ Vines then uses this same distinction between the Word and sacrament as his third reason to prove that the Lord’s Supper is not a converting ordinance. He writes:

Thus the Word is the only instrument of God to beget faith, or work conversion, and there are many expressions of Scripture, tending to prove it . . . the Word is the great Charter of Gods Covenant; His Covenant is to make us his, to entertain us as his, and so the Word is a seed of our new birth, and the milk or meat of our spiritual growth. Unto this Covenant or Indenture hang two seals . . . for their certioration and comfort (Vines, 256).

George Gillespie concurs with Whitaker and Vines. Profane and scandalous persons are to be excluded from partaking of the Lord’s Supper but not from preaching because the Word is to convert and confirm, while the sacraments are to confirm only. He writes:

The word is not only a confirming and comforting, but a converting ordinance . . . whereas the sacrament is not a converting, but a confirming and sealing ordinance, which is not given to the church for *the conversion of sinners*, but for *the communion of saints*. It is not appointed to put a man in the state of grace, but to seal unto a man that interest in Christ and in the covenant of grace which he already hath.³¹

Support is garnered for this distinction from notable Reformed theologians. George Gillespie says that Ursinus distinguishes between the Word and

sacraments as between converting and confirming ordinances. And:

Paraeus puts this difference between the word and sacraments: that the word is a mean appointed both for beginning and confirming faith,—the sacraments are means of confirming it after it has begun: that the word belongs to the converted and to the unconverted,—the sacraments are intended for those who are converted and do believe, and for none others (*Aaron’s Rod*, 231).

The Reformed distinction between the Word and sacraments, as explicated by various Westminster Divines, therefore, provides further evidence that WCF 28.6 should not be interpreted as teaching that baptism conveys initial grace. The Word, and not the sacrament, is set apart by God for conversion.

3. *The Subject of Baptism*

According to the Westminster Standards, covenant membership has its privileges, specifically a right to the sacrament of baptism. Sacraments are for those “within the covenant of grace” (WLC 172), and baptism “is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church” (WLC 166). For this reason, unbelievers are not to be baptized until “they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him” (WLC 166, WSC 95).

Prior to administering baptism to a child, the Directory for Public Worship directs the minister to inform the congregation that children of Christian parents are “Christians, and federally holy before Baptisme, and therefore are they baptized.” William Carter says those who are to be baptized must first be holy, not necessarily inherently holy, but at least federally holy, and set apart from the world by the Word of God. “The seale is holy, and those to whom it is applied must be so, or else it is profaned and made common” (Carter, *The Covenant of God*, 103).

Since the recipients of the sacraments, including baptism, are Christians, holy, believers and members of the covenant, it follows, contra Wright, that the sacraments are not converting ordinances. George Gillespie employs this argument repeatedly. He marshals twenty arguments to prove that the Lord’s Supper is not a converting ordinance, the second of which is “That which necessarily supposeth conversion and faith, doth not work conversion and faith” (*Aaron’s Rod*, 237). In order to forcefully press home his point, the Scotsman argues from baptism to the

29. Presumably Vines is referring to William Whitaker.

30. Vines, *Sacrament of the Lords-Supper*, 248. See also The Synod of Dort, Head V, Article 14; Heidelberg Catechism q. 65.

31. Gillespie, *Aaron’s Rod Blossoming*, 229. See also p. 248 where Gillespie notes that “the application of Christ in the word unto conversion, is a thing of another nature than the sacramental application of Christ, and therefore, like effects, ought not to be ascribed unto these ordinances.”

Lord's Supper. After citing Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, 41; 8:26–37; 10:47, Gillespie writes:

Now if baptism itself (which is the sacrament of our initiation) supposeth (according to the tenor and meaning of Christ's institution) that the party baptized (if of age) doth actually convert and believe, and (if an infant) supposeth an interest in Jesus Christ and in the covenant of grace ... how much more doth the Lord's supper, necessarily, by Christ's institution, suppose that the receivers are not unconverted and unbelieving persons (*Aaron's Rod*, 237)?

His fourth argument is that an ordinance instituted only for believers is not a converting but a sealing ordinance. He then proceeds to prove that the Lord's Supper is such an ordinance by demonstrating, from Roman 4:11, that every sacrament, including the sacrament of initiation is a seal of the righteousness of faith. "If therefore a sacrament be a seal of the righteousness of faith, then it is instituted only for believers and justified persons, because to such only it can seal the righteousness of faith" (*Aaron's Rod*, 238).

The fifth argument is also based upon Paul's discussion of Abraham and circumcision in Romans 4. Abraham's justification is a pattern of ours and he "was not justified by circumcision, or (as Aquinas confesseth upon the place) that circumcision was not the *cause* but the *sign* of justification" (*Aaron's Rod*, 238–239). Gillespie again argues from baptism to the Lord's Supper. "And if God did, by his word, make a covenant with Abraham before he received circumcision, the seal of that covenant, must it not much more be supposed, that they are within the covenant of grace who eat and drink at the Lord's table" (*Aaron's Rod*, 239).

Even more explicit is the fourteenth argument, wherein Gillespie states that since Baptism itself is not a regenerating or converting ordinance—at least administered to those of age—far less is the Lord's Supper a converting ordinance. Baptism cannot be a regenerating ordinance because in Scripture a profession of faith is a prerequisite for those of age (*Aaron's Rod*, 241–242).

Another piece of evidence, therefore, that the Westminster Standards do not embrace baptismal regeneration is their teaching on the subject of baptism. A sacrament that is for Christians, believers and members of the covenant is not compatible with one that confers converting grace.

4. The Conditional Nature of Baptism

The sacraments are not efficacious and effectual means of salvation to all recipients, but only to some who are referred to as "worthy receivers" (WCF 27.3), those to whom the grace belongs (WCF 28.6), and those who believe (WSC 91). If faith is required in order to receive the benefit of baptism, then baptism does not convey regeneration or work faith in the recipient. In other words, the conditional nature of baptism necessarily precludes the doctrine of baptismal regeneration.

In the context of discussing baptismal justification, Anthony Burgess says the sacraments do not convey grace unless faith is present. Even as food does not benefit the dead, so the sacraments will not be effectual "where spiritual life is not laid as a foundation.... But although the Sacraments God hath appointed be not empty mockeries, yet they are effectual onely, where there is due preparation."³² One of the differences, according to Rutherford, between a sacrament and a civil seal is that faith is required in order for the sacrament to be effectual. The seals of grace are conditioned upon faith. Without faith the sacrament is blank and null, yet when used in faith, grace is exhibited and conferred (*Due Right*, 213–217).

Stephen Marshall was a leading member of the Assembly who chaired the sub-committee that drafted the Directory for Public Worship.³³ In his book on infant baptism, which was dedicated to and appreciated by the Assembly³⁴ and personally recommended by Robert Baillie,³⁵ Marshall notes that there are both absolute and conditional elements in the sacrament of baptism. One of the conditional elements is the person's interest in the thing signified. In this respect all sacraments are conditional seals, "sealing the spirituall part of the Covenant to the receiver, upon condition that hee performe the spirituall condition of the Covenant."³⁶ Marshall then approvingly cites Ames who taught that "Sacraments are conditionall Seales, and therefore not seales to us but upon condition" (Marshall, 118). By making the membership of the covenant broader than the elect

32. Anthony Burgess, *The True Doctrine of Justification* (London, 1654) 145. See also Gillespie, *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*, 238. Note especially his citation of the Confession of Bohemia.

33. See William Barker, *Puritan Profiles* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 1999) 120–127.

34. *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly* (eds. A. F. Mitchell and John Struthers; 1874; repr., Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991) 216–217.

35. Robert Baillie, *Anabaptism* (London, 1646) 132, 152.

36. Stephen Marshall, *A Defence of Infant-Baptism: in Answer to two Treatises ...* (London, 1646) 118.

and the sacraments conditional, Marshall is accused of leaning towards Arminianism. He responds with a claim to orthodoxy. He writes:

And are not the Sacraments *signa conditionalia*, conditionall signes and seales? and did any Orthodox Divine before your self charge this to be Arminianism, to say that the Gosþel runs upon conditions? I confesse it is Arminianisme to say any thing is conditionall to GOD, this I never asserted, but that the Gosþell is both preached and by the Sacraments sealed to us upon condition of faith, will passe for orthodox doctrine, when you and I are dead and rotten (Marshall, 236–237).

The Westminster Standards' teaching on the conditional nature of baptism is yet another reason to question Wright's provocative claim. Baptism does not exhibit initial grace because baptismal grace is received by faith.

WHAT ABOUT INFANTS?

The aforementioned arguments apply well to adults but what about infants? Children of believers, according to the Standards, are to receive baptism and yet they are incapable of meeting the condition of baptism. Are infant baptisms efficacious? If not, why then are they baptized? And if so, is baptism a converting ordinance?

It is plausible that the Assembly advocated baptismal regeneration in the case of some infants, particularly in light of Cornelius Burgess' book *Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants*, which apparently received Daniel Featley's approval.³⁷ Burgess was a towering figure who appears to have been involved in every significant activity of the Assembly (Barker, *Puritan Profiles*, 27). Furthermore, his expertise on infant baptism seems to have been valued by his colleagues. According to John Lightfoot, the Assembly chose Burgess to preach at Hempstead in order to counteract Anabaptist teaching.³⁸

That an important member advocated baptismal

37. Cornelius Burgess, *Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants* (Oxford, 1629) 230.

38. John Lightfoot, *The Journal of the Proceedings of The Assembly of Divines*, Vol. 13 of Works (London, 1824), 163.

39. Stephen Marshall's writings on infant baptism would also need to be thoroughly studied. Having been written during the time of the Assembly, and, as mentioned previously, appreciated by the Assembly, they could help elucidate the Confession's teaching on this issue.

40. Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*, 48. Note the phrase "whether of age or infants" in WCF 28.6.

41. A similar conclusion could be drawn from the Confession's teaching on the necessity of baptism.

regeneration is significant but it does not necessarily mean that it was adopted or even tolerated by the Assembly. In fact, since Burgess published his book in 1629 amidst much criticism (See Burgess, *Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants*, 4–5), it is quite possible that he changed or moderated his position by the time the Assembly convened in 1643. At any rate, a careful comparison of Burgess' book with the Assembly's documents is needed in order to determine if they are compatible.³⁹ Such a comprehensive assessment, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, a few pertinent observations will be made. First, as Lewis Schenck has discerned, the Confession does not distinguish between adults and infants in terms of the significance of baptism.⁴⁰ What baptism does for the adult, it does for the child.

Second, in his highly nuanced book, Cornelius Burgess argues for the efficacy of baptism at the time of its administration. If the Spirit is not given during baptism, but only later at the child's effectual calling by the Word, then "betweene the time of Baptisme and effectuall calling outwardly by the word, baptisme is but a bare signe" (Burgess, *Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants*, 109–110). Denial of present exhibition of grace is "a new kind of Divinity" and "destroies the nature of a sacrament" (Burgess, 111).

The necessity of present efficacy is a vital component of Cornelius Burgess' case for the baptismal regeneration of elect infants and yet it is one that appears to be opposed by the Assembly. The Directory says that "the inward Grace and virtue of Baptisme is not tyed to that very moment of time wherein it is administred," while the Confession states that the "efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time, wherein it is administered" (WCF 28.6). Similarly, Anthony Burgess argues that though baptism conveys grace, it may not be at the time of its administration. Opposing the notion of baptismal justification, Burgess writes, "If it be granted, that the Sacrament of Baptism is not onely obsignative, but exhibitiv of grace, yet that doth not follow, that it must be in all, and at that time of Baptism, but it may be exhibitiv of grace in its due time, when it shall please God by the word preached to work it" (Anthony Burgess, *The True Doctrine of Justification*, 144). Since baptismal regeneration depends upon present exhibition, at least as it was understood and argued by Cornelius Burgess, the temporal qualification attached to the efficacy of baptism by the Assembly serves, contrary to Wright, more of a denial than an approbation of baptismal regeneration.⁴¹

Third, Cornelius Burgess finds support for his position in the liturgy of the Church of England. According

to The Book of Common Prayer, both the priest and people are to pray that in coming to holy baptism the child might receive remission of his sins by spiritual regeneration. After the baptism, the priest is to declare that the child is regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ's congregation. Then the priest is to give thanks to God, which is proof to Burgess that spiritual regeneration and not mere sacramental regeneration is in view (C. Burgess, *Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants*, 29–30), with these words: "We yeeld thee hearty thanks, most mercifull Father, that it hath pleased thee to regenerate this infant with thy holy Spirit, to receive him for thine own childe by adoption, and to incorporate him into thy holy congregation."

One of the most pressing tasks committed to the Westminster Assembly was to prepare a new form of worship to take the place of The Book of Common Prayer, which they did with the publication of the Directory for the Public Worship of God (Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, 44–45). If the Assembly had held to baptismal regeneration, as Cornelius Burgess did in 1629, one would expect to find similar language in the Directory. Yet, such language or theology is not found. Instead it is stated that the child is a Christian and federally holy before baptism and that the inward grace of baptism is not tied to the moment of time wherein it is

administered. The minister is to ask God to make the baptism a seal of adoption, which is different from asking God to adopt. Moreover, the minister is not directed to thank God for regenerating the child with the Holy Spirit. These differences, at the very least, weaken Wright's argument from the Directory to prove that the Confession teaches baptismal regeneration.

CONCLUSION

Was David F. Wright correct to conclude that the Westminster Confession of Faith teaches that baptism is the instrument and occasion of regeneration by the Spirit? There are several reasons, gleaned from primary sources which lead us to seriously doubt that he was.

The Confession's affirmation that the sacraments exhibit and confer grace does not by itself prove or even suggest that baptism is a converting ordinance. The grace promised and conferred in baptism could refer to sealing and confirming grace. Indeed, when we consider the Westminster Standards' teaching on the nature and purpose of baptism, the relationship between the Word and sacraments, the subject of baptism and the conditional nature of baptism, a safer conclusion is that the preeminent Reformed confession repudiates the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. ■

In Brief: Stephen Marshall, A Defence of Infant Baptism

"Dr. Gouge moved that there shall be public thanks given to Mr. Marshall for his respect to this Assembly in dedicating his book to the Assembly, which was accordingly done by the Prolocutor" [Mitchell notes: *A Defence of Infant Baptism, in answer to Mr. John Tombes*. The dedication bears date 2d April 1646. His "Sermon on the Baptizing of Infants" to which Tombes replied, had also been dedicated to the Assembly. Alexander F. Mitchell, and John Struthers, *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1874) 443].

Stephen Marshall, *A Sermon of the Baptizing of Infants preached in the Abbey-Church at Westminster, at the Morning Lecture, appointed by the Honorable House of Commons* (London, 1644).

[DEDICATION]

"To the Reverend and Learned the Prolocutor, Assessors, the Commissioners of the Church of Scotland,

and the rest of the Assembly of Divines, now sitting at Westminster To the Reverend and Learned the Prolocutor, Assessors, the Commissioners of the Church of Scotland, and the rest of the Assembly of Divines, now sitting at Westminster."

Some of us who are of your number, freely bestowing our labours in the Abbey-Church, every morning; we agreed among ourselves to instruct our auditors in all the necessary truths of that doctrine, which is according to godliness; one taking for his subject, the *articles of faith*; another the *Ten Commandments*; another the *Lord's Prayer*, etc. My lot of late hath been to handle the doctrine of the *Sacraments*, and coming in order to this point, I endeavoured to clear it as fully as I could in one sermon, and was thereby compelled to borrow a little more time than is usually allotted to that exercise.

Importunity of many friends, who conceived it might give some light to that which is now made a great controversy, and might through the blessing of God, be a means to reclaim some deceived souls, or prevent the deceiving of others, hath brought it thus into public view.

And although I know myself the unworthiest, and unblest of many, yet because I am assured that it is God's Truth which I have preached, and which he will bless, I was the more easily overcome by that importunity; if it may contribute anything to the helping forward of the great work now under your hands, and may ease you of any part of that labour which so exceedingly presseth you, therein I shall rejoice; and in the opportunity I have by dedicating this to your names, to testify that I am

your unworthy brother
and servant in the Lord's work
Stephen Marshall

Stephen Marshall, *A Defence of Infant-Baptism: In Answer to Two Treatises, and an Appendix to Them Concerning It; Lately Published by Mr. Jo. Tombes ...* (London: Printed by Ric. Cotes, for Steven Bowtell, 1646).

To the Reverend Assembly of Divines and Commissioners of the Church of Scotland now sitting at Westminster.

Reverend Sirs, Whereas all of you in general are concerned, and some of you particularly named in the Book I deal with, the world might happily have expected a joint endeavour, where there was a common interest: That I therefore (whilst you are otherwise fully employed) should undertake this task, I desire may not be imputed by you or any to an over-weaning concept of mine own abilities: for had it fallen to some of your lots, I should have hoped the Church of Christ might have reaped more fruit, than it is like to do by my poor and weak endeavours. But my personal engagement to assert that truth of God which I had held forth in a Printed Sermon, which my learned Antagonist (passing by other books written by other men on the same argument) was pleased to single out to combat with, and to lay out his strength upon, hath called me forth to stand up in this controversy, not as your Champion, but as an affectionate friend to the truth, which we are all called upon earnestly to contend for [Jude 3]; in which conflict as I cannot but fear that you will easily discover my weakness; so I cannot but hope that you will not find me neither so foiled by mine adversary, or deserted of God, whose cause I plead, as not to have sufficiently answered that book, which hath obtained to be called in print "The strongest Shield and Buckler wherewith that cause was ever protected [Mr. John Goodwin's answer to Mr. Edwards *Gangr.* p. 20 (*Cre-tensis, or, A Briefe Answer to an Ulcerous Treatise Lately Published by Mr. Thomas Edwards, Intituled Gangraena, [London: Printed by M.S. for Henry Overton, 1646]]*);

but in Salem God of old brake both Sword and Shield [Psalm 76:3], and if he hath done the like now, the weak hand which he hath made use of, serveth only to point at that mighty arm of his, which hath gotten himself the victory. Truths triumph and the Church's peace I have had in mine eye, and have desired to carry meekness and love even to him, whose opinion I fight with, all along in my heart and pen: what ever measure my former writing met with from him, I have endeavoured to look upon his with a neither bloodshot nor lofty eye; passion blinds the one, and pride makes the other oft-times overlook that truth which a lowly eye seeth clearly at a nearer distance: sure I am, the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God [James 1:20], whilst the meek he will guide in judgment [Psalm 25:9], and teach his way. What herein God hath enabled me to do, I willingly submit to the Church's censure, and humbly present to you, not as any way worthy of you, but only as a public testimony of my reverence and gratitude for all the refreshings of spirit, and that abundance of spiritual grace I have found from the hand of God, whilst I have had the happiness to sit among you; for a yet more plentiful effusion whereof upon you, to the happy settling at length of these distracted Churches in truth and peace, is the prayer of

Your unworthy brother, and
servant in the Lord's work
Steven [sic] Marshall
April 2, 1646

EXCERPT FROM A DEFENCE OF INFANT BAPTISM

*What the Sacrament seals absolutely,
and what conditionally*

One Argument more you bring (beside laying of my words together) to prove that this must needs be my sense [that Infants of believers are so within the Covenant of grace, as to be *elect*ed, and to have the *spiritual privileges* of the Covenant belonging to them], because you doubt not but my meaning is agreeable to the *Directory*, which holds forth, That *the promises are made to believers and their seed*: and directs Ministers to pray, That *God would make Baptism to the Infant a seal of adoption, regeneration, and eternal life*. And you [117] conclude, *that if there be not a promise of these saving graces to Infants, in vain are they baptized, and the seal is put to a blank*; To which I reply, my meaning is indeed according to the sense of the *Directory*, and

according to that direction, I do pray that God would make baptism to be a seal to the Infant of adoption, and the rest of the saving graces of the Covenant; yet I utterly deny your consequence, that unless there be absolute promises of saving grace to Infants, the seal is set to a blank, for give me leave but to put the same case; first, for the Infants of the Jews, was the seal put to a blank with them, or had they all promises of saving graces? Secondly, let me put the same case in *grown men*, who make an external visible profession, and thereupon are admitted to baptism, can any man say, that all the saving graces of the Covenant, or the spiritual part of it, is promised to all visible professors? Is it not abundantly known that in all ages, even in the best times, even in the Apostles times, multitudes were baptized, to whom God yet never gave saving graces, and therefore never promised them? For had he made a promise, he would have performed it. But I shall desire you a little to consider the nature of a Sacrament, in what sense it is a seal, and then you need stumble at this no longer; these *three things* are necessarily to be distinguished, first, *the truth of the thing signified* in a Sacrament; and secondly, *my interest in that thing*; And thirdly, *my obligation, to do what is required in or by that Sacrament*: I say therefore, that in every Sacrament, the truth of the Covenant in itself, and all the promises of it are sealed to be Yea, and Amen; Jesus Christ became a Minister of the circumcision, to confirm the promises made unto the Fathers, and so to everyone who is admitted to partake of Baptism, according to the rule which God hath given to his Church, to administer that Sacrament, there is *sealed the truth of all the promises of the Gospel*, that they are all true in Christ, and that whoever partakes of Christ, shall partake of all these saving promises; this is sealed absolutely in Baptism, but as to the second, which is *interesse meum*, or the receiver's interest in that spiritual part of the [118] Covenant, that is sealed to no receiver *absolutely*, but *conditionally*; in this particular, all Sacraments are but *signa conditionalia*, conditional seals, sealing the spiritual part of the Covenant to the receiver, upon condition that he perform the spiritual condition of the Covenant: thus our Divines use to answer the Papiſts, thus Doctor *Ames* answers to *Bellarmino*, when *Bellarmino* disputing against our doctrines *that Sacraments are seals*, alleges then *they are falsely applied oftentimes*; he answers to *Bellarmino*, Sacraments are conditional seals, and therefore not seals to us but upon condition. Now for the third thing, *the obligation* which is put upon the receiver, a bond or tie for him to perform, who is admitted to

receive the Sacrament, this third I say is also absolute, all circumcised and Baptized persons did or do stand absolutely engaged to perform the conditions required on their part, and therefore all circumcised persons were by *the circumcision obliged to keep the Law*, that is, that legal and typical administration of the Covenant which was then in force, and Infants among the rest were bound to this, though they had no understanding of the Covenant, or that administration of the Covenant, when this seal was administered to them. Now then, since in Baptism there is first an absolute seal of the truth of the Covenant of grace in itself, a conditional seal of the receiver's interest in the Covenant, and an absolute obligation upon the receiver to make good the Covenant on his part, is there any reason that you should say, that the seal is put to a blank, where the spiritual part or saving grace is not partaken [partaken] of? What you further say here, that *Abraham* who is the father of the faithful is meant *Abraham's* person, and not every believer, that it was a personal privilege to *Abraham*, and not a common privilege to believers as believers, which thing you repeat very often, it shall be considered in a more proper place. So that, you having thus wholly mistaken my sense, and undertaken to dispute against a sense which I never owned, I may therefore pass over your six arguments which you bring to confute this sense which you have set down: I join with you [119] that it is an error to say that all Infants of believers indefinitely are under the *saving graces of the Covenant*, for although I find abundance of promises in the Scripture, of God's giving saving graces unto the posterity of his people, and that experience teacheth us that God uses to continue his Church in their posterity, and that God's election lies more among their seed than among others, yet neither to Jew nor Gentile was the Covenant so made at any time, that the spiritual part and grace of the Covenant should be conferred upon them all; it is sufficient to me that they may have a visible standing in the Church, partake of the outward privileges of the Church, and be trained up under that discipline, or administration of the Covenant which God uses to make effectual to salvation, in the meantime all of them to be visible members as well as their parents, and some of them invisible as well as some of their parents. ■