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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Infant baptism and the disposition to saving faith

Oliver D. Crisp

University of St Andrews, Fife, Scotland, UK
Email: odc@st-andrews.ac.uk

Abstract

Reformed accounts of infant baptism are usually covenantal and promissory in nature. They are about bringing the child into the ambit of the visible church in the hope the infant will own the faith upon reaching the age of reason. This paper sets out an alternative Reformed account of baptism, drawing on the Scottish confessional tradition. On this account, infants have a disposition to faith conveyed to them in baptism that will in due course become dispositional faith exercised in saving faith. Thus, baptism involves regeneration – or something close to it.

Keywords: baptism; disposition; faith; Reformed theology; regeneration

The Reformed understanding of infant baptism is usually understood to be covenantal and promissory in nature.[1] The baptised child is included in the life of the church, but is not a full member of the church until she or he is able to confess the faith, thereby claiming the promise of salvation offered in the rite of baptism. Things are rather different for those who come to faith later in life and are baptised as believers (either as adolescents or adults). For in that case, there is a clear relation between belief and the rite: one believes and is baptised. But in the case of infants, it seems that faith follows baptism, often by some years. The idea is that the child is baptised in the hope that she will own the faith confessed by her parents in due course, when she reaches the age of reason.

However, there may be theological grounds for a doctrine of infant baptismal regeneration in Reformed theology – or something very close to it. In this essay, I will offer such an account, drawing on the confessional tradition of Scottish Reformed theology

[1]There are well-known exceptions to this, of course. Two worth noting here are the views of Karl Barth in *Church Dogmatics IV/4*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969), who thought paedobaptism theologically indefensible; and Thomas F. Torrance, who tied the sacramental nature of baptism to the vicarious action of Christ's baptism applied to the believer by the Holy Spirit. His views are expressed in 'The One Baptism Common to Christ and his Church' in *Theology in Reconciliation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), pp. 82–105. A standard Reformed view can be found in e.g. the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), answer to Question 74, which says 'infants are also by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, to be incorporated into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Covenant by circumcision. In the New Covenant baptism has been instituted to take its place.' In *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1996), p. 70.

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in order to do so. I will argue that there is a good case to be made for the view that, *in the rite of baptism the Holy Spirit communicates to infants a disposition to saving faith which, if nurtured in the community of faith, will in time become a dispositional saving faith that is exercised in regeneration*. This account is also able to accommodate the differences that exist in cases of adult or believer's baptism (a.k.a. credobaptism). For in such situations saving faith is exercised prior to the administration of the rite. This is what one would expect in the case of someone who is an adult convert to the faith.

The argument proceeds in several stages. In the first section, I provide some theological context for discussion of baptism and sacramental theology more generally in a brief critical account of the Scots Confession and the Westminster Confession. As is well known, both of these confessions are foundational documents in Scottish Reformed theology, with the Westminster Confession remaining the principal subordinate theological norm for the Kirk under holy scripture.[2] We shall see that neither confession *excludes* the sort of account I shall offer here. In fact, they are consistent with it – though I am not suggesting that the account I will set out is the *only view* commensurate with the confessions. My claim is more modest than that. It is just that the view I offer here is, I think, *consistent* with the confessions. That is not a trivial matter given that the view outlined here is rather different than that usually reported in textbook accounts of Reformed theology. With this in mind, I turn in the second section to consider the prospects for a Reformed doctrine of baptismal regeneration – or something close to it, in the bestowal of a disposition to saving faith. This leads to a discussion in the third section of some concerns this doctrine raises with respect to regeneration and election. The conclusion sums up the foregoing and indicates why this may be important in recent discussion of sacramental theology in the Reformed tradition, and as a Reformed contribution to ecumenical theology.

The Scots and Westminster Confessions

Consider the following words from Article 21 of John Knox's Scots Confession of 1560:

> And thir Sacramentes, as weil of Auld as of New Testament, now instituted of God, not onelie to make ane visible difference betwixt his people and they that wes without his league: Bot also to exerce the faith of his Children, and, be participation of the same Sacramentes, to seill in their hearts the assurance of his promise, and of that most blessed conjunction, union and societie, quhilk the elect have with their head *Christ Jesus*. And this we utterlie damne the vanitie of thay that affirme Sacraments to be nathing ellis bot naked and baire signes. No, wee assuredlie beleeve that be Baptisine we ar ingrafted in *Christ Jesus*, to be made partakers of his justice, be quhilk our sinnes ar covered and remitted.[3]

And this, from Article 23 of the same:

[2]See e.g. Article II of the *Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland*, which can be found at: https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/church-law/church-constitution; accessed 21 November 2021.

[3]'Confessio Fidei Scoticana', in Philip Schaff (ed.), *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, vol. 3 of *Creeds of Christendom,* 6th edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), pp. 467–8. A modern English version of the Confession can be found in *The Book of Confessions*. However, this obscures certain points that the Scots version makes plain, which is why I have used the original language here.

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> We confesse & acknawledge that Baptisme apperteinis asweil to the infants of the faithfull, as unto them that be of age and discretion: And so we damne the error of the *Anabaptists*, who denies baptisme to apperteine to Children, before that they have faith and understanding.[4]

In these two passages Knox makes clear that the sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and invisible grace.[5] Sacraments are not merely visible signs, but actually signify some act of divine grace. What is more surprising, perhaps, is his claim that by means of baptism a person is engrafted into Christ, and made a partaker 'of his justice, be quhilk our sinnes ar covered and remitted'. Given that later in the Confession Knox makes clear that baptism applies to the children of believers as well as those who have reached the age of discretion, this is a startling claim. For, taken at face value, it implies that the baptised infant is made a partaker of Christ's righteousness and has her sins remitted – which is tantamount to a doctrine of regeneration. Can it be that Scottish Reformed theology even in this foundational confessional document is compatible with a doctrine of *baptismal regeneration*?

Of course, as I have already said, the Scots Confession, influential though it has been, is not now a subordinate standard for Reformed theology in the Church of Scotland or in much Presbyterianism elsewhere; it is the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646 that currently has that status. So let us consider what it says about baptism. The framers of the Westminster Confession make it clear that sacraments are signs and seals of the covenant of grace, in keeping with historic Reformed thought, in chapter 27, which is titled 'Of The Sacraments'. Specifically, sacraments include 'a spiritual relation or sacramental union' between the sign of the sacrament and what it signifies, whereby 'the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other' in an act of sacramental imputation. With this in mind, on the particular matter of baptism the Confession says this:

> 1. Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church, but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life: which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his Church until the end of the world.[6]

Later in this same chapter, we are told, 'Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.' Moreover,

> 5. Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it, or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.

[4]Ibid., p. 474.

[5]Though Knox does not use the Augustinian language of 'outward sign' and 'inward grace', the sense of the Augustinian view clearly informs what he does say.

[6]Westminster Confession of Faith, ch. 28 ('Of Baptism'), in *The Book of Confessions*.

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Finally,

> 6. The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.

There are subtle differences between the Scots and Westminster Confessions in their sacramental theology. For instance, the nature of a sacrament in the Westminster Confession turns on a relation of sacramental imputation, which does not seem to be the same as Knox's very Calvinian idea of a seal upon the heart of the recipient by means of which some grace is conveyed.[7] It is the difference between treating a person *as if* they had a certain quality that they do not, in fact, possess (imputation), and conveying the quality to that person in reality (the seal upon the heart).

Be that as it may, it is striking that the Westminster Confession does not exclude baptismal regeneration. It merely decouples it from the rite of baptism. By that I mean, it makes clear that the appropriate administration of baptism does not in and of itself convey regeneration – as if merely by the speech act of uttering a form of words and sprinkling an infant that person is in fact made a believer. Nevertheless, it does not exclude the possibility that by means of the administration of the sacrament regeneration may take place. For the framers of the Westminster Confession make clear that, if baptism is rightly administered, the promised grace is not only offered, but really 'exhibited and conferred' by the Holy Spirit – yet in God's own time. This leaves open the possibility that at least some of those who are baptised as infants are in fact the subjects of saving grace (presumably those who are among the elect).

Infant baptism and a disposition to faith

Might infants be regenerate? This is normally thought to be a bone of contention between the Reformed and members of sacramental traditions that endorse a doctrine of baptismal regeneration, such as Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Lutheranism. For it is usually thought that for the Reformed baptism involves covenantal inclusion but not membership of the body of Christ, strictly speaking. It is a case of including the children of believers within the ambit of the visible church in the hope and expectation that in due course they will come to own the faith for themselves as they reach the age of reason, and are confirmed. Only once they have reached an age at which they are able to appropriate the faith for themselves are the children of believers thought to be members of the church, not merely included within the life and practices of the church.

But the matter is a more complex than a cursory look at the literature might suggest. For one thing, there is a Reformed strain of infant baptismal regeneration doctrine. Of particular interest in this regard is the work of the moderate Reformed divines of the Church of England active under the Stuarts.[8] Might it be possible to provide the outline

[7]Paul Nimmo also notes the influence of Calvin on Knox's *Scots Confession* in Paul Nimmo, 'Baptismal Theology and Practice in the Church of Scotland', in Duncan B. Forrester and Doug Gay (eds), *Worship and Liturgy in Context: Studies and Case Studies in Theology and Practice* (London: SCM Press, 2009), pp. 94–5.

[8]For discussion of this, see Hans Boersma *Richard Baxter's Understanding of Infant Baptism* (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2002), ch. 4; Stephen Hampton, 'Samuel Ward and the Defense of Dordt

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of a Reformed doctrine of infant baptismal regeneration (or something close to it) for a Scottish context? It is to this constructive task that we now turn.

To begin with, let us consider some *desiderata* for a Reformed doctrine of baptism. Given that our target is a constructive dogmatic account of baptism, I will simply assume without argument that there is a biblical case for paedobaptism, based in particular on the household passages in the New Testament (e.g. Acts 10, 16, 18, and 1 Cor 1, 7:14), and upon the covenantal connection normally made in Reformed theology that connects baptism and circumcision as initiation rites in the two dispensations of the covenant of grace in the Old Testament and New Testament, respectively.[9] As a matter of fact, I think that there is good reason to think that the baptism of households in the New Testament included children and infants, and I think that the connection between circumcision and baptism strongly suggests paedobaptism as a viable mode of administration. The thought here – familiar to anyone with some passing knowledge of the history of Reformed theology in this matter – is that it would be invidious for God to make the dispensation of the covenant of grace in the Old Testament more gracious than that in the New Testament. Given that in the Old Testament circumcision was a visible mark of inclusion within the covenant people of God, it seems strange to think that the New Testament sacrament of initiation is less inclusive than that of the Old Testament. In fact, we would normally think the reverse is true. With the coming of Christ divine grace is bestowed even more liberally than before (see e.g. Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, in which he cites the prophecy of Joel attesting to this).

As I say, these considerations seem theologically plausible to me, but I will not argue for them here. I will simply assume them since we are engaged in the constructive dogmatic task, not in setting forth a detailed case for the biblical or historical warrant for the doctrine. There is nothing in principle objectionable in proceeding in this way, since it is a common practice in reasoning about particular matters in many different disciplines. For instance, in American jurisprudence, one does not first need to demonstrate the legal basis for capital punishment before arguing that it is unjust. One can begin by assuming the legal standing of capital punishment because it is encoded in black letter law in at least some states, and reason from there to the injustice of such a practice. In the present case I am interested in offering a dogmatic argument for something like infant baptismal regeneration, but I will not first provide a biblical case for infant baptism. That is an important task. But it is outside the ambit of the present discussion, and we can simply assume there is such a case to be made – not least because it has been the normal practice of the vast majority of Christians for the vast majority of church history, including various branches of Scottish Reformed theology.[10]

With these preliminary matters made tolerably clear, we can turn to the question of giving a constructive account of baptism. In order to provide a clear and unambiguous

in England', in Jordan Ballor, Matthew Gaetano and David Sytsma (eds), *Beyond Dordt and De Auxiliis: The Dynamics of Protestant and Catholic Soteriology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 200–18; E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570–1720* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Bryan Spinks, *Sacraments, Ceremonies and the Stuart Divines: Sacramental Theology and Liturgy in England and Scotland 1603–1662* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

[9]See e.g. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.16.3–6.

[10]I understand that there are outliers here, with Barth being the most notorious. But as they say in jurisprudence, one does not make law on the basis of exceptions.

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version of the doctrine, I will state the view in the form of a theological thesis, and then provide some explanation of its major claims. First, the thesis:

> Baptism is normally administered to the children of believers (*paedobaptism*), though it may also be administered to those who, like the first believers in the New Testament, come as adults into the faith (*credobaptism*). In the case of paedobaptism, by means of this rite the child is brought into the ambit of the church as a member of the covenant people of God. The rite itself is not efficacious, but is normally the occasion of divine grace. By participating in the rite, the parents of the infant act in the hope and expectation of the confirmation of faith in the child as s/he matures. Additionally, the infant has conferred on them by the secret agency of the Holy Spirit either a disposition to saving faith that is expressed in dispositional saving faith as the child grows and matures, or a dispositional faith that is expressed in saving faith as the child grows and matures.

The scope of this thesis is deliberately narrow. I have not given a biblical justification of paedobaptism, for reasons already intimated. I have not situated it in a larger theological framework of sacramental theology or of christology and soteriology (as, say, T. F. Torrance does in his treatment of the topic). These are important considerations. But I have zeroed in on the question of how it might be that regeneration normally occurs in paedobaptism in a manner that is broadly consistent with the confessional commitments of Scottish Reformed thought. This is a nodal issue for a Reformed account, given that it seems to fly in the face of much traditional teaching on the matter.[11]

Additionally, I have suggested how paedobaptism and credobaptism may be related, and have left open whether one or the other mode of baptism is the norm. This is another topic of theological discussion that has divided theologians, but we need not take a view on that here. I have also indicated that the view entailed by the thesis is consistent with the covenantal theology of traditional Reformed justifications for paedobaptism. One can hold to a covenantal view and to the Reformed baptismal regeneration account as well. (I take this to be a point in favour of the doctrine offered here.)

The efficacy of the rite is not in its performance as such (though, like other sacraments, the connection between the sign and the thing signified is a close one) and does, I think, imply a kind of divine speech act. That is, by means of the water and form of words used in the rite, the minister engages in the action of baptising the child, but God also acts by means of the rite. Although God is not constrained by something outwith the deity to act when the rite is administered, God binds Godself to the performance of the rite, in that God has ordained the rite as the means by which the deity may convey a particular grace. So the efficacy of the rite is not in its performance as such, but in the action of God by means of the rite. We might say that God uses the rite as God's instrument, as a fitting means by which to convey a particular grace. God could use other means, and he may on some occasions (e.g. the regeneration of the thief on the cross without baptism). But baptism is a fitting means that God has ordained as the normal mode of entry into the life of the church.

[11]I say it 'seems' to fly in the face of traditional Reformed teaching advisedly. In fact, as I have already said, there are historic Reformed accounts of baptismal regeneration, as Boersma, Hampton, Hollifield and Spinks made plain in their work.

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The parents act on behalf of the infant in baptism, in a covenantal context. That is, they seek to baptise their child so as to bring her or him into the ambit of the visible church, and in the hope that in due course she or he will come to own the faith when they mature. But in addition to this, God normally uses infant baptism as the instrument by which he conveys saving grace to the child. Note, that on this formulation the freedom and agency of God are respected, while making it clear that God uses infant baptism for particular purposes in salvation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the thesis distinguishes three distinct things that the Holy Spirit may convey by means of the administration of the rite. These are a *disposition to saving faith*, *dispositional saving faith* and *saving faith*. Because these are conceptual hinges on which this thesis hangs, it behooves us to consider what differentiates them with some care. So, to begin with, let us say something about dispositions. I take it that a disposition is a property that a particular entity has to express certain powers or tendencies in particular circumstances or occasions. Thus, an Olympic athlete has the power to run at great speed, provided that she trains hard, has the right diet, is in an environment conducive to her flourishing and so forth. When the athlete was a child we might say she had the disposition to become a great athlete, though (being a child) she was not a great athlete at the time. Nevertheless, she was disposed to be a great athlete. Had circumstances been different, she might not have realised that dispositional potential. For instance, if she had been in a major traffic accident and lost the use of a limb, she would not have realised her athletic potential. The disposition to being a great athlete would not have been expressed. The example of the Olympian athlete helps us to see that there is a distinction between the disposition or power to do a thing and the realisation of that disposition or power in action.

Now, suppose we make a further distinction between the disposition or power to be an Olympian sprinter, the Olympian athlete with the disposition or power to sprint and the Olympian athlete sprinting. In the first case, we have a person who, under the right circumstances, could have the power to be an Olympian athlete. Suppose it is the athlete as a child. She is not an Olympian sprinter, but she has the power to be one in the future. The disposition to be an Olympian sprinter is not the same as being an Olympian sprinter. For clearly, the child is not an Olympian sprinter, though she has the disposition to be an Olympian at some future date. In the second case, an Olympian with the disposition or power to sprint at an Olympian level has that power in the present, even when she is sitting with a cup of tea, reading a novel. And the Olympian who is in the act of sprinting has realised that disposition or power – she is exercising it!

So, the disposition to be an Olympian is different from being an Olympian. The one who has a disposition to be an Olympian sprinter is not an Olympian sprinter at present. By contrast, the Olympian with a disposition to sprint is an Olympian sprinter, though she does not exercise that ability when at rest. Finally, the Olympian who is in the act of sprinting is instantiating or exercising her disposition to sprint.

Let us apply these distinctions to the case of infant baptism. The claim of the Reformed baptismal regeneration thesis is that in the rite of baptism the Holy Spirit conveys a particular grace to the one being baptised. This may be a disposition to saving faith. That is one thing. However, the Spirit may convey dispositional saving faith to the child, or even saving faith itself – though I would imagine this last is very unusual (though John the Baptist may be thought to be an example; see Luke 1:41). In the case of dispositional saving faith, the child would have to be able to exercise the power of faith (analogously with the Olympian who has a disposition to sprint), which no infant seems capable of doing. That said, it may be that the soul of a child

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has this grace conveyed directly to it, so that the infant soul may exemplify a dispositional saving faith – provided one thinks that human beings normally have souls.[12] In the case of saving faith, the child would actually be exercising saving faith, an act that seems beyond the normal capacities of infants (again, with the infant John the Baptist leaping for joy in the womb as a possible exception).

Let us call the version of the view that implies only that the child receives a disposition to saving faith the *disposition to faith account*. And let us designate the version of the view that entails the child receives dispositional saving faith, the *dispositional faith account*. We can distinguish them as follows:

DISPOSITION TO FAITH ACCOUNT
In baptism the infant normally has conferred on them by the secret agency of the Holy Spirit a disposition to saving faith that is expressed in dispositional saving faith, and, in due course, in the exercise of saving faith, as the child grows and matures.

DISPOSITIONAL FAITH ACCOUNT
In baptism the infant normally has conferred on them by the secret agency of the Holy Spirit a dispositional saving faith that is expressed in due course in the exercise of saving faith, as the child grows and matures.

On the disposition to faith account the child is not regenerate, strictly speaking. She is given a grace that will be expressed in a disposition to faith in due course as she matures that will eventuate in the exercise of saving faith at some future moment in time, in the purposes of God. On the dispositional faith account dispositional saving faith is communicated to the child, so that she is regenerated through the administration of baptism. Furthermore, this dispositional faith is realised or exercised in saving faith in due course as the child matures.

Both these variations on the basic Reformed baptismal regeneration thesis with which we began are feasible within the confessional bounds of a Scottish Reformed theology. For both are consistent with symbols like the Scots Confession, and even the Westminster Confession – or so it seems to me.

Regeneration and election

This brings us to the question of election. One cluster of concerns raised by a Reformed doctrine of baptismal regeneration has to do with the connection between baptism and election. There are three particularly thorny questions in this neighbourhood. First, there is the issue of whether all infants who are baptised are regenerate, and therefore among the elect. This is a concern for very practical reasons: it seems that many who are

[12]There is a question about the composition of human beings in the background here. But it seems to me that the variations on the sort of view of baptismal regeneration we are interested in are consistent with more than one way of thinking about the metaphysics of human persons, including versions of the sort of substance dualism – be it broadly Platonic (like Calvin) or broadly hylomorphic (like much of the Reformed Orthodox) – that would have been familiar to framers of the Reformed confessions. That said, I see no reason why one could not opt for some sort of non-reductive physicalism or compositional account of human persons, and help oneself to arguments for baptismal regeneration, or something close to it. I leave it as homework for readers to adapt the reasoning offered here to the particular account of human persons they find persuasive.

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baptised as infants do not go on to own the faith for themselves, but lapse into unbelief as they reach maturity. A second, related problem is this: if infant baptism is regenerative, shouldn't we then forcibly baptise all infants in the expectation that they will be numbered among the elect? Third, there appears to be a problem with the regenerative view of infant baptism in relation to believer's baptism. For normally in believer's baptism the person being baptised has already professed faith and is (so we think) regenerate. We presume, with the New Testament, that a person who is of the age of reason, and *compos mentis*, should be able to make a profession of faith in order to be baptised (e.g. the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8). Not so, infants. They are baptised without any such profession, given their immaturity. But this seems to mean that infant baptism is more epistemically generous than believer's baptism, for it requires much less of the person being baptised. What is more, the infant being baptised can expect to be regenerated without faith, whereas the believer is regenerated with faith, and is then baptised. So there is a significant difference between the two modes of baptism, which seems to raise concerns about the parity of the different administrations of the sacrament.

Let us take these concerns in the order raised. As to the worry about whether all baptised infants are among the elect, the several versions of a Reformed regeneration account set forth here do not presume to judge who is among the elect. That is a matter over which we must draw a veil of ignorance. It is consistent with the doctrines set forth here that the secret purposes of God in election are good and generous, even if we do not know their precise extent. This is the importance of the modal condition 'normally'. It indicates that both the disposition to faith and the dispositional faith accounts of Reformed baptismal regeneration are themselves conditional upon God's sovereign action in election. And, after all, as the Apostle says, who can know the mind of God or be his counsellor (Rom 11:34)? Thus, it would be wholly inappropriate to use these doctrines as a rationale for the blanket baptism of all infants irrespective of the desires of parents or family in the expectation that the children would be among the elect. Discernment in the administration of the sacrament is, after all, pastorally requisite. This also answers the question of those who are baptised as children and lapse in their outward adherence to the faith in later life. It is possible that such individuals are not among the elect; but it is possible that they are. They may have been truly regenerate – in which case, God will finally reconcile them to Godself. But they may not have been truly regenerate. Given that mere humans do not have access to the secret purposes of God (Deut 29:29; Prov 21: 1; Eph 1:5), this too is a reason for theological humility in the face of God's sovereign purposes in the economy of salvation. Such theological humility is perfectly consistent with the baptismal regeneration doctrines set forth here.

The question about parity between the two modes of baptism – whether paedobaptist or credobaptist – appears harder to turn back. It is certainly true that conditions for baptism in the case of infants and believers are different. But that is true of any doctrine of baptism that permits both kinds of administration. In the traditional covenantal form of paedobaptism in Reformed thought the conditions for infant baptism are different than those of adult baptism precisely because the infant is not capable of professing faith. The same is true in the regeneration accounts as well. It is because infants do not have agency with respect to faith that the administration of the sacrament is different from the baptism of an adult. However, one difference in regeneration accounts of paedobaptism is that they imply the conditions for infant baptism are more generous than those for the baptism of adults. Because infants are incapable of exercising faith, they may be regenerated without expressed faith through baptism. The same is

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not true of adults who are required to profess faith before baptism. But this is just a function of the differences between children before the age of reason, and adults who are *compos mentis*. It is not a problem with the mode of baptism as such, but a problem generated by the fact that children cannot exercise faith as adults can, so that the conditions for their baptism must be different.

One final thing worth clarifying at this juncture is the following: as should be evident from the foregoing, the disposition to faith account of baptismal regeneration does not, in fact, imply that infants are regenerated through, or by means of the administration of baptism. Instead, normally they are given a grace by the Holy Spirit that, like the child who has the disposition to become an Olympic athlete in later life, will grow to become dispositional faith in due course, which should give rise to saving faith. So a particular grace is conveyed in baptism, but it is not regeneration as such. It is more like a disposition to become regenerate at a later date when the child has reached the age of reason. But, lest the form of this version of the doctrine be misunderstood, the idea is not that the infant is given a preparatory faith, or even that the child is made propitious to faith in the right circumstances – a kind of incipient preparationist doctrine that may make some Reformed thinkers nervous. No synergism is implied, whereby divine grace works in concert with human agency in such a way as to be partly dependent on it. Rather, the claim here is that the work of the Spirit in providing a disposition to faith through baptism is wholly a work of divine grace. Monergism, which is the notion that a given work is brought about wholly by God, is clearly in view.

What of the dispositional faith account of baptismal regeneration? This does provide grounds for thinking that in baptism the infant is regenerated. As such, this is a significant difference between the two versions of Reformed baptismal doctrine once we have parsed them out. As I have already indicated, I am sympathetic to the disposition to faith view; but a Reformed theologian could take the dispositional faith account. Both seem to be consistent with the confessionalism of Scottish Reformed doctrine.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that a version of baptismal regeneration is consistent with the confessionalism of Scottish Reformed doctrine. I have given some account of two key symbols, the Scots Confession and the Westminster Confession. I have also set out a thesis statement for a Reformed account of baptismal regeneration that I think is consistent with these two symbols. Then, through further reflection on what is entailed by the thesis of Reformed baptismal regeneration, I offered two refinements: the disposition to faith account, and the dispositional faith account. The first does not entail baptismal regeneration, but something more modest, namely the bestowal of a disposition to saving faith that normally, in due course, should give rise to a dispositional faith, and the expression of that in saving faith as the child matures. The second, dispositional faith account does include a doctrine of baptismal regeneration in the gift of dispositional faith bestowed by the Spirit upon the infant.

Baptism is a central practice in life of the Christian church. If it is possible to come to a view of this sacrament that is a proper expression of Reformed doctrine based upon a right understanding of scripture and of the confessions, and that holds out a hand in ecumenical fellowship to Christians of other traditions for whom baptismal regeneration is the traditional way of construing the grace conferred in the rite, then that is surely something worth taking seriously. As I have already indicated, I have not provided a *complete* account of such a doctrine here. Nevertheless, this might be read as

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an essay in doctrinal criticism that tries to motivate a Reformed doctrine of baptismal regeneration or something close to it – a doctrine according to which infants who are baptised receive from God a disposition to saving faith.[13]

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