

QUESTION ABOUT BAPTISM

28 June 2020

Question: Does baptism depend upon the merit or spirituality of him who administers it? The answer is no.

John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes* (IV.16): “Moreover, if we have rightly determined that a sacrament is not to be estimated by the hand of him by whom it is administered, but is to be received as from the hand of God himself, from whom it undoubtedly proceeded, we may hence infer that its dignity neither gains nor loses by the administrator. And, just as among men, when a letter has been sent, if the hand and seal is recognised, it is not of the least consequence who or what the messenger was; so it ought to be sufficient for us to recognise the hand and seal of our Lord in his sacraments, let the administrator be who he may. This confutes the error of the Donatists [4th century heretics], who measured the efficacy and worth of the sacrament by the dignity of the minister. Such in the present day are our Catabaptists [immersionists who oppose baptism by sprinkling], who deny that we are duly baptised, because we were baptised in the Papacy by wicked men and idolaters; hence they furiously insist on Anabaptism [Rebaptism]. Against these absurdities we shall be sufficiently fortified if we reflect that by baptism we were initiated not into the name of any man, but into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and, therefore, that baptism is not of man, but of God, by whomsoever it may have been administered. Be it that those who baptised us were most ignorant of God and all piety, or were despisers, still they did not baptise us into a fellowship with their ignorance or sacrilege, but into the faith of Jesus Christ, because the name which they invoked was not their own but God's, nor did they baptise into any other name. But if baptism was of God, it certainly included in it the promise of forgiveness of sin, mortification of the flesh, quickening of the Spirit, and communion with Christ.”

On the nature of the sacraments, the Westminster Confession (XXVII.3) states, “The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it: but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers” (Rom 2:28–29, 1 Pet 3:21, Matt 3:11, 1 Cor 12:13, Matt 26:27–28).