

History and Work of the Committee

The special committee was erected by the 2020 Fall Stated meeting of the Presbytery of Ohio, as reflected in the following minute from that meeting:

On motion that the presbytery erect a special committee of three (two ministers and one ruling elder), to study Scripture and the Standards of our church on whether “baptisms” performed by those who are not lawfully ordained ministers of the Gospel are to be recognized as valid baptisms, and to report their findings to the Fall 2021 stated meeting; and that this committee shall have allotted to it a travel budget of up to \$1,000.00.

Presbytery elected Revs. Patrick Ramsey, Mark Garcia, and Elder Mark Graham. The moderator appointed Mr. Ramsey as convener.

The special committee met in person three times (10-29-20; 05-27-21; 09-11-21) and via zoom twice (09-23-21; 09-29-01), and now presents the following report and recommendation to presbytery.

Introduction

The Study Committee was tasked by the Presbytery “To study Scripture and the Standards of our church on whether ‘baptisms’ performed by those who are not lawfully ordained ministers of the Gospel are to be recognized as valid baptisms.”

The precise issue to be addressed, therefore, is not propriety but validity. Put simply, we are not tasked to focus on what *should* be the case, but rather what *is* the case when baptism is administered by a layperson. Is such a baptism valid?

This clarification is immensely important for our purposes in this report. There are at least two reasons for saying so. Firstly, the propriety of only ordained ministers of the Gospel administering Christian baptism is a matter of great importance. It is a biblical, and particularly dominical command; it belongs to our need to embrace obediently *how* God works and not only *that* he works; and it is also clearly taught in our secondary and tertiary standards. In a time when the Church continues to wrestle with expressions of evangelical Christianity which downplay or deny the special office of minister and the ordinary importance not only of the sacraments but of their proper, ordered administration, we are concerned to defend and commend the importance of minister-only baptism. We therefore earnestly encourage the sessions of our Presbytery to consider making this a part of our teaching and preaching ministry in all our congregations. Various helpful resources are available for studying this question and for teaching our church members properly, some of which have been provided to this committee for consideration. We believe that clear instruction on this point may help present and future generations of believers to avoid the problems associated with improper activity of this kind.

Secondly, the clarification offered above is important for the Presbytery to keep in mind throughout consideration of what follows. What we have discovered in our review of the literature provided to us or discovered by us is that many treatments of this question conflate the distinct questions of propriety and validity. However, an argument regarding what *should* be the case does not necessarily address the question of how to evaluate what *is* the case. There are many features of faith and life in which we recognize that something has been done improperly, even sinfully, and yet nevertheless has been done truly. One familiar example of this

phenomenon is the marital union of a believer with an unbeliever: this ought not to be done, and may also be regarded as sinful and not only improper, and yet the result is a real marriage nonetheless. In the special context of the Church's ordinances, the distinction we must observe has been expressed in terms of *validity* versus *regularity*. What is irregular may nevertheless be valid, although it may also be invalid. But one is not the other. It is necessary, therefore, to make the case for invalidity by demonstrating more than irregularity.

It bears noting that the terms "validity" or "valid" as applied specifically to baptism only come into regular use in the late medieval period, and then become a common feature of Reformation-era discussion, and then beyond. Many recent English translations of pre-Reformation church writings supply the term "valid" or "validity" when no equivalent Latin term appears in the original (particularly for Augustine and Aquinas). The specific terms remain a vital aspect of the discussion about baptism from the Reformation until the current day, but we note the relative novelty of the terms as central to this discussion, even if the concept implied by each is embedded in the Scriptures and our confessions.

In what follows we offer reasons for our conclusion regarding the question put before us, namely, that *baptisms performed by those who are not lawfully ordained ministers of the Gospel are irregular (and must not be done) but are not necessarily invalid, and thus may be recognized as valid baptisms if they are performed by Christians and satisfy the definition of Christian baptism*. There are thus various parts to our conclusion. Such baptisms:

- Are irregular
- Must not be done
- Are not necessarily invalid (but could be)
- May be recognized as valid baptisms
 - If they are performed by baptized Christians and
 - If they satisfy the definition of Christian baptism

A valid baptism, whether performed by a lawfully ordained minister or by a non-ordained Christian, is one that satisfies Christ's command to baptize and thus ought to be recognized as having occurred. Charles Hodge writes: "That is valid which avails for the end intended. The question, therefore, as to the validity of the sacraments is a question as to what is necessary to their being that which they purport to be."¹ To baptize a person who had already received a valid baptism would thus be to re-baptize them, which is a grievous prospect that greatly troubled our Reformed forebears, whereas to baptize a person who had received an invalid baptism would be to baptize them for the first time.

Furthermore, although validity is at the heart of this Committee's work, our goal is not to determine the issue of validity comprehensively, that is, to identify all the elements necessary for a valid baptism or to anticipate all possible circumstances in which the distinction between irregular and invalid may obtain. While these are relevant considerations, our focus is narrower, namely, to determine if administration by a lawfully ordained minister is one of the elements necessary for a valid baptism. In other words, is administration by such a minister part of the essence of baptism, without which it is not baptism, or not?

¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 3:523. Similarly, William Cunningham says, "... that baptism, in order to be valid, i.e., in order to be what ought to be held and reckoned baptism..." Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (repr., Carlisle, Pa: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 1:168.

The Westminster Standards

So much of the discussion in the western church and churches (medieval, early modern, and modern) bears the mark of the famous Donatist controversy of the fourth and fifth centuries. The specific language used in the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles as well as in the Westminster Standards, for example, is a direct reaction to the memory of the Donatist moment and its challenges over time. Article 26 and WLC 161 both directly invoke Augustine of Hippo's refutation of Donatism by making clear that the efficacy of the sacrament does not depend upon the virtue or piety of the one administering them but rather upon the work of Christ. Yet questions concerning the legitimate administration remained, and Augustine leaves us one particularly instructive example. In his long treatise *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, Augustine himself concludes with some basic uncertainty regarding the questions before this committee. It is worth noting that he had by this point in the work dealt with almost every imaginable exception or extreme and questionable example of baptism. "I have no hesitation in saying that all those have Baptisms who, though they receive it deceitfully, yet receive it in the Church, or where the Church is thought to be by those in whose society it is received, of whom it was said, 'They went out from us' (I John 2:19)."

Augustine continues, intentionally exposing the limits of his own thoughts here by presenting a particularly thorny, even if extreme, example. In responding to it, he resorts uncharacteristically (for him) to prayer for a sort of special revelation:

But when there was no society of those who so believed, and when the man who received it did not himself hold such belief, but the whole thing was done as a farce, or a comedy, or a jest – if I were asked whether the baptism which was thus conferred should be approved, I should declare my opinion that we ought to pray for the declaration of God's judgment through the medium of some revelation seeking it with united prayer and earnest groanings of suppliant devotion, humbly deferring all the time to the decisions of those who were to give their judgment after me, in case they should set forth anything as already known and determined. And, therefore, how much the more must I be considered to have given my opinion now without prejudice to the utterance of more diligent research or authority higher than my own! (VII.102).

While we all would certainly disagree with aspects of Augustine's mystical method of last resort here, we might well learn much from his humble and teachable conclusion to a perennially vexing question.

The Westminster Standards affirm that the sacraments should always be administered by lawfully ordained ministers of the Gospel (WCF 27.4, 28.2; WLC 176). There are no exceptions provided. Sacraments are "to be dispensed by ministers of the gospel, and by none other (WLC 176)." This position is in accord with what the Westminster divines had earlier promulgated in their Directory for Public Worship (DPW), which says that "Baptism... is not to be administered in any case by any private person, but by a minister of Christ, called to be the steward of the mysteries of God." This position is also essentially restated in chapter 2 of our DPW: "Although the efficacy of the sacraments does not depend upon the piety or intention of the person administering them, they are not to be administered by any private person, but only by a minister of the Word."

125 The Westminster divines thus departed from the practice of the Church of England as
126 outlined in the 1559 edition of *The Book of Common Prayer*.² According to its baptismal liturgy,
127 in times of necessity—for instance, if it seems the infant is dying—then baptism is to be
128 administered by one who is present.³ Interestingly, the divines did discuss the issue of exceptions
129 when they debated the phrase “in any case” from the Directory. It was suggested that there may
130 be some cases which would necessitate lay baptism such as in the time of extraordinary
131 persecution, when presumably there may not be any lawfully ordained ministers.⁴ The divines
132 decided, however, to include the phrase in the Directory, thereby making it clear that there is
133 never a time when it is appropriate to baptize without a minister.

134 The Standards, therefore, expressly teach that only ministers are to administer baptism. They
135 do not, however, expressly tackle the question of the validity of baptism administered
136 improperly, in particular, of lay baptism. But do they implicitly address it?

137 It might be argued that the absolute requirement for a ministerial administrator leads, by
138 good and necessary consequence, to the conclusion that lay baptisms are invalid. This argument,
139 however, begs the question. For the lack of a ministerial administrator to entail that lay baptisms
140 are invalid, the ministerial administrator must be considered an essential element for baptism.
141 But this is exactly the point of contention. The issue, again, is not whether a minister *should*
142 administer baptism. The Standards are clear on that matter. It is legitimate to deduce from this at
143 least that lay baptism is irregular and improper. But it moves beyond the bounds of necessary
144 inference to argue that the lack of the minister also *invalidates* a baptism, which is the issue at
145 stake. What needs to be shown is that a ministerial administrator is an essential element of
146 baptism, which point was at the heart of the debates on this issue during the 16th and 17th
147 centuries in England.

148 Thomas Cartwright (1535-1603), a noted Puritan and English Presbyterian, argued against
149 the doctrine and practice of lay baptism in times of necessity by appealing to the *being* of a
150 sacrament. He said that “the dignity” and “the being” of a sacrament depends upon ministerial
151 administration. Reflecting the concerns of the Donatist controversy, he said that it does not
152 matter if he is a good or evil minister, but he must be a minister because “the substance of the
153 sacrament dependeth chiefly of the institution and word of God, which is the form, and, as it
154 were, the life of the sacrament, of which institution, this is one, and of the chief parts, that it
155 should be celebrated by a minister.”⁵ Although the Scriptural rule regarding the minister is only a
156 part of the institution, “if the whole of the Institution be not, it is no more Sacrament then the

² Lay baptism, however, was condemned by King James II at the Hampton Court conference in 1604. See <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-92779>; Thomas Blake, *The Covenant Sealed* (London: 1655), 279-280; Thomas Bedford, *A Treatise of the Sacraments* (London, 1638), 32.

³ Brian Cummings, *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 146-7.

⁴ Chad Van Dixhoorn, et. al., *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly 1643-1652* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3:198. Other traditions such as the confessional Lutheran church have maintained this practice, but not without occasional internal debate.

⁵ Thomas Cartwright, *A REPLYE TO AN answere made of M. Doctor Whitgifte AGAINST THE ADMONITION to the Parliament* (Hemel Hempstead?: Printed by John Stroud?, 1573), 144.

157 papists communion was which celebrating in one kind took a part of the institution and left the
158 other.”⁶

159 On the other hand, John Whitgift, the Archbishop of Canterbury (1583-1604), argued against
160 Cartwright that “the dignity of the sacraments do not depend upon the man, be he minister or not
161 minister, be he good or evil.”⁷ He did not accept Cartwright’s assertion that every part of the
162 biblical institution of baptism needs to be present for the sacrament to be valid, finding no
163 Scriptural warrant for it and appealing to the example of circumcision, which he said was true or
164 valid even when it was not performed by a priest.⁸ Moreover, Whitgift claimed (erroneously) that
165 no ancient or modern writer supported Cartwright’s position. Some of them believed that lay
166 baptism was lawful, either in all or only in some situations, while others believed it was
167 unlawful, “yet is there none of them (such only excepted as err in re-baptization) that think ‘the
168 being of the sacrament so to depend upon the minister, that there is no sacrament if it be not
169 celebrated by a minister.’”⁹

170 Richard Hooker (1554-1600), an influential English theologian, also argued against
171 Cartwright’s position. He believed that the rule of ministerial administration was given by God
172 “for Order’s sake in his Church, and not to the end that their authority might give being, or add
173 more force, to the Sacrament itself.”¹⁰ Furthermore, he claimed that the “general and full consent
174 of the godly learned in all ages doth make for validity of Baptism, yea, albeit administered in
175 private, and even by Women; which kind of Baptism, in case of necessity, divers reformed
176 Churches do both allow and defend; some others which do not defend, tolerate; few, in
177 comparison, and they without any just cause, do utterly disannul and annihilate.”¹¹

178 Like Whitgift and Hooker, Thomas Blake also made use of the distinction between the law of
179 ministerial administration and validity in his discussion on the sacraments, which was published
180 in 1655. After listing seven arguments for ministerial administration, Blake added that he did not
181 make it “of the essence of Sacraments in general,” that is, “judge it to be so of the integrality of
182 the Sacraments of the New Testament, that it should be no manner of Sacrament, if it be not
183 carried on by the hand of the Minister.”¹² Consequently, lay baptism breaks “a Gospel rule,” is
184 “a foul breach of Gospel-order,” and “a transgression,” and “must be opposed,” but it does “not
185 nullify a Sacrament.”¹³

186 Richard Baxter is another example of a theologian who employed the same distinctions. He
187 believed that only ministers should baptize but he also did not think that lay baptisms were
188 invalid because the minister is not essential to the ordinance, and therefore he would not
189 rebaptize people who had been baptized by lay persons, “supposing that they had all the
190 substance of the Ordinance, as being baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy

⁶ Cartwright, *A REPLYE*, 144.

⁷ John Whitgift, *The Works of John Whitgift: The Second Portion* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1852), 519.

⁸ Whitgift, *Works: The Second Portion*, 529-30.

⁹ Whitgift, *Works: The Second Portion*, 526.

¹⁰ Richard Hooker, *The Ecclesiastical Polity and Other Works of Richard Hooker* (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1830), 2:241.

¹¹ Hooker, *Works*, 2:244.

¹² Blake, *The Covenant Sealed*, 277-278.

¹³ Blake, *The Covenant Sealed*, 278-279.

191 Ghost.”¹⁴ Baxter also noted in his *Christian Directory* that “so many learned Protestants think,
192 that though a private man’s baptism be a sin, yet it is no nullity, though he were known to be no
193 minister.”¹⁵

194 The main point to observe from this debate between Cartwright on the one side and Whitgift,
195 Hooker, et al. on the other is that the role of ministerial administration and the validity of lay
196 baptisms are distinct concerns unless one makes ministerial administration an essential element
197 of baptism and thus one of the criteria for assessing its validity. If one does not make ministerial
198 administration essential, then one may consider lay baptism unlawfully or at least improperly
199 administered, and yet valid.¹⁶

200 Since it was common before and after the composition of the Westminster Standards to
201 distinguish between the law of ministerial administration and validity, we conclude that it is to
202 beg the question to insist that an affirmation of the absolute requirement for ministerial
203 administration necessarily implies the invalidity of lay baptism. One must demonstrate that the
204 Standards teach that the rule regarding ministerial administration is part of the essence of the
205 sacrament. On this point, the Standards are silent. They simply do not say one way or the other,
206 either explicitly or implicitly.

207 Moreover, it might be argued that the Standards implicitly affirm the validity of lay baptisms
208 because they teach that the sacraments do not depend upon the administrator for their power and
209 efficacy (WCF 27.3; WLC 161; WSC 91). Similarly, and also reflecting the concerns of the
210 Donatist controversy, John Whitgift wrote, “The force and strength of the sacrament is not in the
211 man, be he minister or not minister, be he good or evil, but in God himself, in his Spirit in his
212 free and effectual operation.”¹⁷ It might, then, be claimed that the Standards regard lay baptisms
213 as valid because of God effectually working through the administrator of the sacrament.

214 The problem with this line of reasoning, however, is that it assumes that the rule of
215 ministerial administration is not part of the essence of the sacrament. It is possible to hold to the
216 position that the sacrament does not depend upon the man *and* believe that sacraments
217 administered by laypersons are invalid because of the distinction between the office and the man.
218 As previously noted, Cartwright stated that the administrator must be a minister, but also that the
219 minister’s personal sins do not invalidate the baptisms he performs as a minister of Christ’s
220 church. The validity of the sacrament, therefore, does not depend upon the man, but upon Christ
221 who requires that it be administered by a lawfully ordained minister.

222 William Perkins employed the same distinction as Cartwright. He said that baptism by
223 “priuate persons, that haue no authoritie at all to minister” are “a meere nullitie; because they
224 haue no calling thereto, neither can they doe it of faith: forasmuch as they haue neither precept
225 nor exaple out of the word of God.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, he also argued that “the force and efficacie

¹⁴ Baxter, *Certain Disputations of Right to Sacraments, The Second Edition* (London: Printed for Nevil Simmons, 1658), 323,

¹⁵ Baxter, *A Christian Directory* (repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996), 629.

¹⁶ See Whitgift, *Works: The Second Portion*, 531. He cites Augustine in support, “But, although it be usurped (he meaneth baptism by laymen) without necessity, and is given of any man to any man, that which is given cannot be said not to be given, although it may be rightly said that it is not lawfully given.”

¹⁷ Whitgift, *Works: The Second Portion*, 529.

¹⁸ William Perkins, *THE WHOLE TREATISE OF THE CASES OF CONSCIENCE, DISTINGUISHED INTO THREE Booke*s (Cambridge: Printed by John Legat, 1606), 303.

thereof, doth not depend upon the worthiness of the Minister, but upon Christ.”¹⁹ Perkins isn’t contradicting himself because of the difference between the man and the office. Consequently, the confessional teaching that sacramental efficacy does not depend upon the administrator does not imply the validity of lay baptisms. One must demonstrate that the rule regarding ministerial administration is not part of the essence of the sacrament, but the Standards are silent on that point.

Particularly in light of the differences among Reformed theologians, if the Westminster divines had wanted to make the invalidity or validity of lay baptisms a matter of confessional and liturgical concern, then one would think that they would have done so either in the Confession or especially in the Directory for Worship. After all, they had the theological tools and even confessional precedent to do so. Regarding the latter, the Scots Confession of 1560 affirms that sacraments cease to be “right,” that is, true sacraments of Christ Jesus when they are not “ministered by lawful ministers.”²⁰ They, therefore, reject Roman Catholic baptisms because their baptisms are not considered to be administered by lawfully ordained ministers, but rather by women or by ministers who are not regarded as ministers of Jesus Christ.²¹ The Westminster divines, especially the Scottish commissioners, were intimately familiar with the Scots Confession, which makes their silence on the validity question of lay baptism appear deliberate and quite significant. It strongly suggests, at the very least, that they did not endeavor to settle the matter confessionally, thereby tacitly allowing a certain amount of liberty and diversity on the issue.

This conclusion comports well with the Assembly’s stated task to produce works that were according to “the example of the best Reformed churches,”²² and which might visibly maximize the agreement among all Reformed churches, and not merely the Reformed church in Scotland. According to Jan Rohls, the Scottish Confession is the only confession that invalidates lay baptism. He wrote,

Although the other confessional writings regard only the lawfully called officeholder as the rightful administrator of the sacrament of Baptism, they do not go so far as to call into question the validity of baptisms that were not administered by the officeholder. Baptisms by private persons are a misuse of the sacrament and are to be halted, but that misuse does not call into question the sacrament’s validity.²³

Biblical and Theological Considerations

¹⁹ Perkins, *Treatise of Conscience*, 305.

²⁰ J. T. Dennison, Jr., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: 1523–1693* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008–2014), 2:202–3. The Latin edition (1572) translates “right” with “vera.” See Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 3:471.

²¹ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2:203.

²² *The Covenant: with a narrative of the proceedings and solemn manner of taking it* (London, 1643), 3.

²³ Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 208. Charles Hodge made a similar observation: “What the Bible, therefore, seems to teach on this subject is, that Christ having appointed certain officers in his Church to preach his Word and to administer his ordinances, for any man, under ordinary circumstances not duly appointed, to assume the functions of the ministry, is irregular and wrong, because contrary to the order of Christ’s Church. Further than this the Reformed and Lutheran standards do not appear to have gone.” *Systematic Theology*, 525.

It is noteworthy that so many in the history of the Church, including in the Reformed tradition, have concluded affirmatively regarding the validity of irregularly administered baptism by the non-ordained. To be sure, as is typical for disputed matters, their testimony is not unanimous, but it is significant. Within our own communion, Dr. Robert Letham's recent and well-received *Systematic Theology* serves as an example:

How may we determine the validity or irregularity of the sacraments? Protestants have shied away from dogmatism since they recognize that the efficacy of the sacraments depends on the blessing of Christ through the Holy Spirit. But this is exactly what Rome says! If we are to be faithful to Christ's intention, there must be the giving and receiving of the elements as Christ commanded, and the intention must be to do what Christ required, as expressed in the reading of the Word of God that records their institution. These things are necessary for the sacrament to be valid.

Since Christ has appointed order in his church, officers for ruling and teaching, it is a violation of good order for the sacraments to be administered by someone not called to those offices. The sacraments are defined by the Word and are to be administered in connection with the Word preached. Therefore, the one administering them should have been ordained to the ministry of the Word. When administered otherwise, they are irregular. While irregularity does not entail invalidity, neither does the validity of the sacrament justify irregular administration.²⁴

Dr. Letham here articulates several of the observations this report commends for careful reflection, and judiciously asserts the importance of proper administration without conflating that question with the distinct matter of validity.

However, the theological question remains: how *can* baptism be valid or real while also being irregular (perhaps even improper) in its administration? Put differently, what are the theological preconditions that could account for the validity of an irregularly administered baptism? How might these theological preconditions help us distinguish between those whose irregular baptism is valid, and those whose irregular baptism is invalid? We cannot provide a full response here, but we humbly propose the following observations as pertinent to this important set of questions.

Firstly, the validity of irregularly administered baptism by baptized Christians may be regarded as consistent with our Church's insistence that the efficacy of a sacrament is not contingent upon the worthiness of the minister administering it. Arguably, the latter affirmation implies the former, at least at the level of expectation, suggesting that the contrary conclusion requires careful explanation of how lacking ordination is not a species of the genus of a faulty administrator. We are unable to see a way this concern is sufficiently accounted for in the invalidity model.

Secondly, we note that there are many biblical and theological arguments presented in the literature which favor the conclusion of this report but that we do not find conclusive. For example, Ananias baptized Paul at the Lord's command (Acts 9:10-19) but it not said that he did so as an officer of the Church or in direct connection with the visible Church. It has often been suggested that because he administered the sacrament of baptism for Paul, he must have

²⁴ Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 646-7. Many other examples of this point of view from Reformed systematic theologies could be listed.

therefore been ordained. In this reading, the fact of the Lord's command to Ananias is often treated as equivalent to or as constituting ordination. This has a certain *prima facie* plausibility, but only that. The opposite has also been suggested, namely, that because there is no evidence of Ananias's ordination, ordination is unwarranted or at least unrelated to baptism. While better arguments may be made in favor of one reading instead of the other, and however suggestive this passage may be, we do not regard the example of Ananias as sufficiently conclusive for our question.

Thirdly, we regard Scriptural teaching regarding baptism itself as more pertinent. As many have noted historically and in recent scholarship, what we understand about baptism itself contains an important part of the answer, namely, that *baptism inaugurates the baptized into the corporate priesthood of all believers*, on account of which Christians enjoy real priestly privileges.

From Tertullian onwards the Church has spoken of baptism as entry into the priesthood, drawing parallels with ordination to the Aaronic priesthood.²⁵ In doing so the Church exhibits her theological reception and coordination of certain key features of the Scriptural testimony. These include especially that (1) the Church is the royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9-10; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6), and (2) through baptism the Spirit incorporates members into that community (1 Cor. 12:12-13), suggesting that (3) baptism therefore inducts into Christian priesthood.

Against the background of Old Testament descriptions of ordination or consecration to priesthood (cf. Exod. 28; Lev. 8-9), 1 Peter is regarded as the most explicit of New Testament texts regarding this confluence of major truths.²⁶ In 1 Peter, baptism, which saves through the resurrection of Christ (1 Pet. 3:21) is presented against the backdrop of the old covenant as the administration of the once-for-all priestly bath to the new household inaugurated in Jesus Christ, of the line of the Melchizadekian priesthood which is better than Aaron's (Heb. 7), in Whom a kingdom of priests is formed. "As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood..." (1 Peter 2:4-5, 7; cf. v. 9). Baptism thus not only communicates something to the individual who is baptized and thus initiated into the visible Church. It also communicates something to and about the Church herself—that she is, through Christ's death and resurrection/ascension, initiated into and participating in the kingdom of priests constituted in the unique, heavenly, and eternal priesthood of Christ himself.

All who are baptized into the priestly Body which is the Church thus enjoy derivative priestly privileges. The reality of the priesthood is what contextualizes and characterizes the offerings, sacrifices of praise, etc. that the Church renders before the Lord. The proper ordering of those priestly privileges is a chief concern of faithful church governance, and it is the fact that the *whole Church* enjoys these privileges that provides the warrant for the *Church's* appointment of her officers in faithful presbyterian fashion. The inherent power of baptism lies in the divine

²⁵ Noted by, among many others, Tom Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology, Volume 1: The Priestly Catholicity of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 174; cf. pp. 174-7. Greggs mentions by name Tertullian, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Gregory of Nazianzus, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and others.

²⁶ On baptism in relation to the priesthood of the Church and biblical consecration rites, see Peter J. Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs: A Theology of Baptism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003). As with nearly all other authors noted in this report, including Tertullian, Augustine, Gregory, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, Leithart is somewhat controversial, but his work is noted here for its collection of relevant evidence and clarity of argument regarding the coordination of ordination, baptism, and ecclesial priesthood.

Word and in the Church's relationship to that Word, not in any power bestowed by ordination to the pastor as such. Strongly hierarchical models of church governance tend to reflect an ontological distinction between the minister and the congregation, and on such a model it is arguably more coherent to deny the validity of non-ordained baptism. After all, the powers of sacramental administration are—on such an understanding—vested in the minister *as such* and not in the congregation as priestly Body. But on presbyterian convictions which reject such strong hierarchical and ontological differentiation between minister and congregation, it is arguably more coherent to affirm the validity of irregularly administered baptism, inasmuch as the Body is priestly, not the minister only. Note in this connection the language of our Form of Government III:

The power which Christ has committed to his church is not vested in the special officers alone, but in the whole body. All believers are endued with the Spirit and called of Christ to join in the worship, edification, and witness of the church which grows as the body of Christ fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplies, according to the working in due measure of each part. The power of believers in their general office includes the right to acknowledge and desire the exercise of the gifts and calling of the special offices. The regular exercise of oversight in a particular congregation is discharged by those who have been called to such work by vote of the people.

The priestly Body is called to proper ordering and use of its powers. As this report has stated in several ways, it is only lawful for the minister to baptize; this is proper order in the Church, and Christ's ordering of his Church is not unimportant in the least. However, what is not lawfully done may still be done truly though improperly, including baptism, and the priesthood of the baptized (an aspect of what has been called the "general office" of the believer) may help us understand why their improperly administered (but valid) baptism should be regarded as qualitatively different from, say, an unbaptized person presuming to baptize (which would be invalid, lacking the reality of belonging to the priesthood of the Church). We all *have* the "power" of baptism on account of our belonging to the priestly Body of Christ, but we do not all therefore have lawful *use* of that power. Luther put the matter succinctly for us:

Let every man then who has learnt that he is a Christian recognize what he is, and be certain that we are all equally priests, that is, that we have the same power in the word, and in any sacrament whatever, *although it is not lawful for any one to use this power*, except with the consent of the community.²⁷

Luther elsewhere explains the same distinction, and also draws attention to the baptism as a sacrament that inaugurates the baptized into priestly privileges:

Whatever issues from baptism may boast that it has been consecrated priest, bishop and pope, although it does not beseem everyone to exercise these offices. For, since we are all *priests alike*, no man may put himself forward or take upon himself, without our consent and election, to do *that which we have all alike power to do*. For, if a thing is common to all, no man may take it to himself without the wish and command of the community.... Between

²⁷ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) from E. G. Rupp and B. Drewery, *Martin Luther* (London, 1970), 50. Emphasis ours.

laymen and priests, princes and bishops, or, as they call it, between spiritual and temporal persons, the only real difference is one of office and function, and not of estate.²⁸

John Calvin, with all major Reformation and Post-Reformation theologians, affirmed the same. Calvin understood the priesthood of believers in terms of the Church's real participation in the threefold office of Christ as Prophet, King, and Priest. In one example Calvin, who was concerned to correct those who confused the priesthood of all believers with grounds for rejecting ordained offices, stated, "In Christ we are all priests, but to offer praises and thanksgiving, in short, to offer ourselves and ours to God" (*Institutes*, IV.xix.28). The "general" office, which is not to be confused with the "special" ordained office, is nevertheless priestly in character. The Second Helvetic Confession (chapter 18) affirmed this teaching as well: "To be sure, Christ's apostles call all who believe in Christ 'priests,' but not on account of an office, but because, all the faithful having been made kings and priests, we are able to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God through Christ" (Exod. 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:6).

To be sure, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has at times—and perhaps especially in our day—led some to reject order in the Church completely in favor of a radical democratic model. This has led brethren to deny the validity and importance of ordained ministry and church office in quite comprehensive terms. Nevertheless, an abused or misapplied doctrine should be corrected rather than disposed of, and Luther, Calvin, and others provide examples of a doctrine of the Church's priesthood that neither discards order in the Church nor requires an ontologically and spiritually distinct priesthood of ministers alone.

Yet it must also be noted that the doctrine outlined above, namely, that baptism inaugurates into a priestly people who *therefore* baptize, implies that *only the baptized* may perform a valid baptism, whether regular or irregular. Put differently, the theological precondition for valid irregular baptisms suggested herein is that baptized Christians have been initiated into a priestly people who—precisely as a priesthood in Christ the true Priest—are set apart as such from the non-priestly world. Baptism is not an individual but a churchly (cultic) rite. It is necessary for one to belong to the priestly Body for one's baptism of another to be a candidate for a valid baptism. Other elements for a valid baptism which are outside the purview of this report must also be in place, but this element—the Christian baptism of the baptizer—would appear to be indispensable for these theological reasons. Moreover, it should be noted that this is not a matter of the worthiness of the baptizer, but of their cultic "location" *in* rather than *outside* the visible Church. The difference between being in or outside of the Church is baptism, making the Christian baptism of the baptizer necessary.

None of the foregoing arguments will likely appear decisive when considered alone, but the combination of these various considerations, alongside the theological reasoning exhibited in our confessional tradition, suggests to us the greater coherence of the position which regards as valid the irregular baptisms carried out by non-ordained baptized Christians.

Conclusion

²⁸ Luther, *Appeal to the German Nobility* (1520), cited from Rupp and Drewery, *Martin Luther*, 43–44. Emphasis ours. Cf. David F. Wright, "Ordination," *Themelios* 10.3 accessed online at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/ordination/>

This committee has been tasked by the Presbytery to study the Standards and Holy Scripture on the issue of the validity of lay baptisms. The Standards, however, do not explicitly, or, as we have argued, implicitly speak to the validity of ‘baptisms’ performed by those who are not lawfully ordained ministers of the Gospel. They are silent on the matter, even as they were clearly familiar with the debates. This observation is significant and instructive. The validity or the invalidity of lay baptisms is not a matter adjudicated by our confessional Standards. With respect to the teaching of Holy Scripture and the Christian tradition, including the Reformed tradition, we regard the irregular baptisms carried out by non-ordained baptized Christians as potentially valid.

Repeating our initial preview now as a closing summary, we commend to the Presbytery the following profile of our conclusion for careful consideration:

Baptisms performed by those who are not lawfully ordained ministers of the Gospel are irregular (and must not be done) but are not necessarily invalid, and thus may be recognized as valid baptisms if they are performed by Christians and satisfy the definition of Christian baptism.

There are thus various parts to our conclusion. Such baptisms:

- Are irregular
- Must not be done
- Are not necessarily invalid (but could be, as in a case of baptism by a non-baptized person)
- May be recognized as valid baptisms
 - If they are performed by baptized Christians and
 - If they satisfy the definition of Christian baptism

Recommendation:

1. That the Presbytery receive this report as information.
2. That the committee be dissolved.