

Regional Synod West – Overture from CPE re Form for the Baptism of Infants

Overture RSW 2024

The following overture was presented by the Aldergrove Canadian Reformed Church to Classis Pacific East June 6, 2024.

It was then presented by CPE June 6, 2024, to Regional Synod West 2024.

It is now being presented by RSW 2024 to General Synod 2025, along with the entire decision of RSW 2024.

Regional Synod West – Overture from CPE re Form for the Baptism of Infants

1 Proposal to revise the Form for the Baptism of Infants

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3 Preamble:

4 In the Aldergrove congregation, we have been blessed in having many children born and thus being able
5 to witness many baptisms. This also means that we frequently hear the reading of the Form for the
6 Baptism of Infants. It's a beautiful Form with rich biblical content. However, we are not completely
7 happy with it and would like to make a proposal for a revision.

8 Comments about our existing Form.

9 1. Many of the sentences are long and contain multiple clauses. This is not conducive to public
10 reading. The opening sentence is 33 words. The last sentence of the first main paragraph is 26
11 words. The third main paragraph begins with a 28 word sentence. The fifth paragraph is a
12 single monster sentence of 71 words. The prayer before baptism has a paragraph which is a
13 single sentence of 50 words.

14 2. The Form as a whole is too lengthy; ideally, it would be half as long as it is. It may be best to have
15 a longer and shorter Form as with the Forms for the Lord's Supper. This is especially true in
16 larger congregations with many baptisms each year.

17 3. In general, the language of the Form is overly formal and comes across as stilted. When read, it
18 doesn't sound like anything else in the worship service. It's like a verbal island unto itself. We
19 realize that a Form will be somewhat formal, but it should not sound like words "out of time."

20 4. There are a few problems with lack of clarity. For instance, pronouns are used with somewhat
21 unclear referents. Examples would be the word "This" in line five of the first main paragraph
22 and the word "It" in line six of the same paragraph. Such sentences should be rewritten to make
23 more clear what word or phrase the pronouns are standing in for.

24 5. There are a few problems with logical flow. For instance, the word "therefore" doesn't seem to
25 function properly in the sentence which reads: "We are, therefore, baptized into the name of
26 the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,". The word "therefore" indicates that a conclusion is
27 being drawn from what precedes. However, the conclusion doesn't seem to flow in an obvious
28 way from the first sentence of this paragraph. Another example of an unclear use of the word
29 "therefore" is found at the beginning of the second paragraph of the "Prayer Before Baptism."

30 6. There are some phrases and sentences which could communicate incorrect ideas. For
31 example:

32 a. The concept of detesting ourselves in the first main paragraph. We think the wording
33 here needs more nuance. We would prefer something like "detesting our sins and our
34 sinful nature." Lots of people "detest themselves" in all sorts of pathological ways and
35 we don't want to encourage this through imprecise language.

36 b. The clause containing the words "which is no more than a constant death" is somewhat
37 misleading. Our lives as Christians are not only a constant death. We also experience
38 constant renewal (2 Cor. 3:18). We have love, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit. Yes,
39 there is all sorts of misery, as is said a bit later in the form, but it's false to state that life

Regional Synod West – Overture from CPE re Form for the Baptism of Infants

- 40 is "no more" than a "constant death."
- 41 7. The lengthy paragraph with Biblical references seems a bit disjointed. We get a reference to Gen.
42 17:7, then to Acts 2:39, followed by a couple of lines about circumcision, then a sentence about
43 Christ blessing the children and then some teaching about how baptism has replaced
44 circumcision. The Mark 10:16 reference seems to be in the wrong place in terms of the logical
45 flow of the paragraph. It feels like it got inserted after the original wording was finished. The
46 paragraph reads much more fluidly without the Mark 10 reference. We think it would be more
47 suitable to simply move the Mark 10 reference to follow immediately after the Acts 2
48 reference.
- 49 8. Various commentators have noted the awkwardness of the first paragraph of the "Prayer Before
50 Baptism." One commentator on the Form writes that the sentence structure of the form in this
51 first part of the prayer is "tedious and the statement too meticulous so that the high note of
52 adoration is difficult to maintain." He also references the comments of Abraham Kuyper who
53 stated that "the remembrances of these mighty miracles of God could have been very suitably
54 recorded in the form itself, but less suitably in the prayer."¹ The sudden introduction of typology
55 (and in a prayer) feels like a foreign element in a Form which focuses on the promises of the
56 covenant which are signed and sealed in baptism.
- 57 9. There are already some revisions of our Form in circulation. The URCNA has an updated
58 one and so does the RCNZ.
- 59 10. In line with the above comments, we are putting forward a proposal for a revised Form for
60 Infant Baptism. We may at a future time also submit a proposal for a shorter Form.

61 **Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ:**

62 What God in Scripture has revealed to us about holy baptism can be summarized in this way:

63 **First**, Scripture teaches that we and our children are conceived and born in sin. By nature, we are
64 children of wrath, and, for that reason, cannot enter the Kingdom of God unless we are born again.
65 Baptism, whether by sprinkling or immersion, shows that sin has made us so impure that only God can
66 cleanse us. Through baptism, we learn to hate our sinful nature, to humble ourselves before God, and
67 to seek cleansing and salvation from him.

68 **Second**, baptism was instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ as a sign and seal of the washing away of our
69 sins. He instructed the church to baptize disciples into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy
70 Spirit.

71 When we are baptized into the name of the Father, God the Father testifies and seals to us that he
72 makes an eternal covenant of grace with us. He adopts us as his children and heirs. He promises to

¹ B. Wielenga, "The Reformed Baptism Form: A Commentary" (Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2016). Location 2992 and 3018 of the Kindle version. Originally published in Dutch in 1906.

Regional Synod West – Overture from CPE re Form for the Baptism of Infants

73 sustain us in his goodness and to protect us against all evil or turn it to our benefit.

74 When we are baptized into the name of the Son, God the Son promises us that he washes us in his
75 blood from all our sins. He unites us to himself so that we share in his death and resurrection. Through
76 this union with Christ, we are freed from our sins and accounted righteous before God.

77 When we are baptized into the name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assures us by this
78 sacrament that he will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ. He will impart to us what we
79 have in Christ, namely, the washing away of our sins and the daily renewing of our lives. Throughout
80 our lives, he will continue his work of sanctifying us until we stand before Christ in perfection.

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82 God's promises in baptism were foreshadowed in events of the Old Testament. The book of Genesis
83 reveals that God, in his righteous judgment, punished the unbelieving and unrepentant world with the
84 flood. At the same time, the believer Noah and his family were protected and came through the flood
85 to a new life. Likewise, the book of Exodus reveals that God drowned stubborn Pharaoh and his armies
86 in the Red Sea while providing safe passageway on dry land for his people Israel. These Old Testament
87 events point forward to the reality of baptism in which Christ promises to unite us to him in both his
88 death and resurrection.²

89 **Third**, having considered the promises of the covenant of grace, we must now also consider the
90 obligations. Through baptism, God calls us and places us under obligation to live in new obedience to
91 him. This means that we must hold fast to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We must trust him,
92 love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We must not love the world. Instead, we are
93 called by baptism to put off our old nature and to lead a God-fearing life. When through weakness we
94 fall into sin, we must not despair of God's mercy, nor continue in sin. Instead, we should remember our
95 baptism which is a seal and trustworthy testimony that we have an eternal covenant with God. If we
96 confess our sins, God will forgive us and renew our lives, just as he has promised to do.

97 Our children's inability to understand baptism is not a reason to withhold it from them. Just as, without
98 their knowledge, they share in Adam's condemnation, so too are they, without their knowledge,
99 received into grace in Christ. God's inclusion of children in his covenant of grace is revealed in what he
100 said to Abraham, the father of all believers: "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your
101 offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your
102 descendants after you" (Gen. 17:7). What God said to Abraham, he also says to us and our children. The
103 apostle Peter also testifies to the inclusion of the children of believers in God's covenant of grace when
104 he says: "For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the
105 Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:39). Christ our Lord also taught that children are members of the
106 covenant people of God. He showed this when he "took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his

² This might be the only suitable location for including the Flood and Red Sea references currently found in the Prayer Before Baptism portion of the Form. If Classis and Synod desire to keep these references in the Form, we suggest this wording be included here.

Regional Synod West – Overture from CPE re Form for the Baptism of Infants

107 hands on them" (Mk. 10:16).

108 In the time of the Old Testament, God commanded that infants be circumcised as a seal of the covenant
109 and of the righteousness that comes by faith. With the coming of Christ, baptism has replaced
110 circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant. Therefore, children of believers are to be baptized as
111 heirs of God's kingdom and of his covenant. As they grow up, their parents have the duty to instruct
112 them in the promises and obligations of God's covenant of grace.

113 In order that we may now administer this holy sacrament of God to his glory, for our comfort, and to
114 the edification of the church, let us call upon his holy name.

Prayer before baptism

116 We thank you, O Lord, for your covenant of grace established with believers and their children. Your
117 promises to your people are powerful and precious and we take great comfort in them. We thank you
118 that the promises of the gospel proclaimed in Scripture are so fully declared and sealed to us in holy
119 baptism.³

120 We thank you for covenant mercies extended also to this child. We pray, O Lord, that you would look
121 graciously upon him/her and that through the Holy Spirit you would unite him/her to your Son, Jesus
122 Christ. May he/she be buried with Christ into death and raised with him to a new life. We pray that
123 he/she may follow Christ every day, joyfully bearing his/her cross, and always holding fast to our
124 Saviour in true faith, firm hope, and devoted love.

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126 Grant to this child, O Lord, and to all our children, the full assurance of your grace, so that when they
127 leave this life and its constant struggles against sin, they may appear before the judgment seat of Christ
128 without fear.

129 We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one only
130 God, lives, and rules forever. Amen.

Address to the parents

132 Beloved in Christ our Lord:

133 Since you have presented your child for holy baptism, and to make clear that you desire baptism for the
134 correct purpose, we ask you to answer sincerely the following questions:

135 First, do you believe that our children, though conceived and born in sin and subject to the misery
136 caused by sin, even to condemnation, are sanctified in Christ and so, as members of his church,
137 ought to be baptized?

³This is an entirely new paragraph. Instead of abruptly introducing complex typology, it seeks to ground the prayer in the preceding content of the Form.

Regional Synod West – Overture from CPE re Form for the Baptism of Infants

138 Second, do you believe that the doctrine of the Old and New Testaments, summarized in the
139 confessions and taught here in this Christian church is the true and complete doctrine of salvation?

140 Third, do you promise as father and mother to instruct your child in this doctrine, as soon as
141 he/she is able to understand, and to have him/her instructed therein to the utmost of your
142 power?

143 What is your answer?

144 Answer: I do (to be answered by each parent).

145 **Baptism:** _____, I baptize you into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the
146 Holy Spirit.

147 **Prayer of thanksgiving:**

148 Almighty God and merciful Father, we thank you and praise you for the forgiveness which you have
149 granted to us and our children through the blood of your beloved Son. We thank you for uniting us to
150 Christ through the Holy Spirit and adopting us as your children and for confirming these blessings
151 through baptism.

152 We pray, O Lord, that you will always guide this child by the Holy Spirit. May he/she be nurtured in
153 the Christian faith and in godliness and grow and mature in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help him/her to
154 recognize your fatherly goodness and mercy which you have shown so abundantly to all your
155 people.

156 We pray that _____ may learn to live a righteous life under the direction of our Jesus Christ who is
157 the only Teacher, King, and High priest of the church. Give to him/her the strength and courage to fight
158 and overcome sin, the devil, and his whole dominion. May he/she praise and exalt you and your Son,
159 Jesus Christ, together with the Holy Spirit, the one and only true God. Amen.

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161 **END OF OVERTURE**

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164 From Acts of Regional Synod West, the article containing the assembly’s decision on the overture

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166 **Article 34 [6b]: CPE Overture re: Form for the Baptism of Infants**

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1. Materials:

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1.1 Overture from CPE (Appendix E)

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1.2 Letters from the following Canadian Reformed Churches: Willoughby Heights (6b.a), Winnipeg Redeemer (6b.b), Carman East (6b.c), Edmonton Immanuel (6b.d), Elm Creek (6b.e), Edmonton Providence (6b.f), St. Albert (6b.g), Coaldale (6b.h), Taber (5w)

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2. Observations:

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2.1 The Overture proposes a revision to the form for the baptism of infants on the following grounds:

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2.1.1 Many of the sentences are long and contain multiple clauses.

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2.1.2 The Form is too lengthy, particularly in the case of churches where many baptisms take place annually.

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2.1.3 The language of the Form is overly formal and does not sound like anything else spoken in the worship service.

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2.1.4 There is in some cases a lack of clarity, a problem with the logical flow or a clumsiness from offering a series of Scripture quotations.

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2.1.5 Some phrases could communicate incorrect ideas.

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2.1.6 The prayer before baptism is awkward as a way of addressing God.

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2.1.7 Other churches with whom we have fellowship have revised our form in use.

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2.2 From the correspondence received we observe the following:

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2.2.1 There are differing perspectives on whether the overture provides sufficient grounds for being adopted. For example, Willoughby-Heights states, “We believe that this overture presents compelling reasons to seek linguistic revision of the form, as well as restructuring its layout.” Meanwhile, St. Albert does not see any need for changing the form and is concerned for the loss of the historical connection to the churches of the Reformation.

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2.2.2 Despite the diversity of perspectives noted above, both these churches support the idea that General Synod appoint a committee to review the form. Willoughby-Heights states, “[W]e suggest that GS 2025 not be asked to adopt the form as proposed, but to submit the overture to a Study Committee, which would be mandated to solicit the input of the churches on a revised form, process this input, and come with a new proposed text to GS 2028.” St. Albert states, “a better approach would be to have General Synod create a specific committee of the best theologians our federation has to offer to propose a careful and considered revision to address specific issues identified, while maintaining the history and cohesion of the existing form.”

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3. Considerations:

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3.1 The overture presents sufficient grounds to justify a revision of the form.

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3.2 While any number of churches see no need for the revision of the form and others are glad

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to support it, there are in principle no objections to the idea of revising the form.

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Regional Synod West – Overture from CPE re Form for the Baptism of Infants

208 3.3 While this overture does contain helpful suggestions, input from the churches has made clear
209 that it needs further scrutiny and revision. Consequently, there is merit to the suggestion of
210 several churches to have General Synod appoint a committee for the purpose of proposing to
211 the churches a revised form for baptism. This suggestion is in keeping with our past practice.
212 Whenever existing liturgical forms had to be significantly updated or adjusted, a separate
213 subcommittee was appointed (e.g. GS 1980 & 1983). Further, in the more recent past such a
214 committee was appointed to study the matter of liturgical forms jointly with their
215 counterparts in the United Reformed Churches with a view toward unity (GS 2007 Arts. 98 &
216 159).

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218 **4. Recommendation:**

219 4.1 That Regional Synod West forward the overture of CPE to GS 2025, together with a
220 recommendation to appoint a committee for the purpose of proposing to the churches a
221 revised form for infant baptism.

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223 **Adopted**

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