Testing the Waters

Infant Baptism as a Case Study for Doing Reformed Theology Interculturally

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Leden beoordelingscommissie

To Marlies

without your love, support, dedication and patience
I would never have accomplished this research

Abbreviations

BBBE-model – Heuristic Research Model - Believing, Belonging, Behaving and Experiencing

Primary Sources
AsianCat - Chacko, Mohan. *I Want to Know God. An Asian Catechism*.
BC – Belgic Confession (1561)
BEM - Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (1982)
HC – Heidelberg Catechism (1563)
Inst. – John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (1559)
NIV - New International Version (1978)
QA - Question & Answer (subsection in the Heidelberg and Westminster Catechisms)
WSC – Westminster Shorter Catechism
WLC – Westminster Longer Catechism
WCF– Westminster Confession of Faith

Churches
CCAP – Church of Central Africa Presbyterian
RCN – Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated)[1]
RPCI – Reformed Presbyterian Church of India

Documents Empirical Research
D-xxx – Document (baptismal form, confession etc.)
E-xxx – Representative of Espoused Theology
F-xxx - Representative of Formal voice of theology

[1] 1 May 2023 the RCN merged with the 'Dutch Reformed Churches' into a new denomination. Because of the fact that during the research period the RCN existed as a separate denomination, the name RCN is used.

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1 - Introduction

1.1. Research Interest

The Reformed churches emerged in Western Europe in the 16th century, in the context of the Protestant Reformation, but today they can be found all around the world. The Protestants desired the renewal of church life and theology and presented fresh expressions of the Gospel in the early modern Western setting of city-states.[1] Different strands of the Reformed theology and tradition developed,[2]but for practical reasons, I will limit myself to the branch of the Reformed churches that wishes to stand in the tradition of John Calvin and the Reformed confessions designed in line with his theology.[3]

The European Reformed churches developed some limited missionary activities in the 17th and 18th centuries, in some way, usually typically related to the Western trade companies, which explored and exploited the world outside of Western Europe.[4] In the 19th and 20th centuries, the Reformed churches were spreading to the Southern hemisphere through missionaries, usually in a colonial setting. There was often little respect for the cultural and religious situation of the local people to whom they were reaching out: conversion to Christianity often implied cutting ties with the 'idolatrous' culture and becoming, in many respects, alike to the white people of the West. The Reformed theology and liturgy were typically offered as a 'ready-made' religion, which could simply be transplanted: the style of the liturgy, songs, buildings, ecclesiastical structure, and the Reformed confessions were pre-fabricated. Even though this is at odds with the Reformed motto '*semper reformanda*',[5] this attitude changed only (slowly) in the 20th century, when local theologians and Bible schools in the Majority world began to do Reformed theology in a more contextual way.[6]

My interest in the unity and diversity of Reformed theology as a worldwide theological tradition is the main incentive for this research. My starting observation is that there is a growing presence of Reformed churches, theologians and believers around the world. They identify with the worldwide Reformed family and intend to practice the Reformed faith in line with the Reformed confessions and liturgies. While they desire to do this in a way that is relevant to their own context, they at the same time want to safeguard the 'family ties' with other members of the Reformed family.

My personal interest in this research topic is related to my own life and work as a Reformed teacher. I have been involved in teaching Reformed theology in different locations in Eastern Europe and Central Asia for most of my working life. Currently, I am teaching intercultural theology to students

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[1] Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2004); Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, Reprint edition (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 2005).

[2] Peter Opitz, *The Myth of the Reformation* (Göttingen, Germany ; Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013); Paul T. Nimmo and David A. S. Fergusson, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[3] Esp. the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Westminster Standards (1647).

[4] See e.g. Leendert Jan Joosse, *'Scoone dingen sijn swaere dingen': een onderzoek naar de motieven en activiteiten in de Nederlanden tot verbreiding van de gereformeerde religie gedurende de eerste helft van de zeventiende eeuw* (Leiden: Groen en zn, 1992); Peter C. Phan, ed., *Christianities in Asia* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Mark Häberlein, 'Protestantism Outside Europe', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, ed. Ulinka Rublack (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 353–55.

[5] G. van den Brink and J.C. Smits, 'The Reformed Stance. Distinctive Commitments and Concerns', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 9, no. 4 (2015): 325–47.

[6] Elias Kifon Bongmba, ed., *Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016). See also: Martha Frederiks, 'World Christianity: A Training School for Multiculturalism', *Exchange* 38 (2009): 3–20; Eleonora Dorothea Hof, *Reimagining mission in the postcolonial condition: a theology of vulnerability and vocation at the margins* (Zoetermeer, The Netherlands: Boekencentrum, 2016); Benno van den Toren, 'The Significance of Postcolonial Thinking for Mission Theology', *Zeitschrift Für Missionswissenschaft* 45, no. 2–3 (2019): 210–28.

from various socio-religious contexts at the Theological University Kampen|Utrecht. When travelling, teaching and preaching in various contexts, a question that always triggered me is: how is Reformed theology, as a Western tradition, actually received and used in different contexts? Is Reformed theology today an integrated part of the lived theology of Reformed Christians in different parts of the world, or is it experienced as a foreign Western religion, a 'potted plant', a relic from the colonial past, or perhaps as part of a process of modernization, globalization or Westernization? In short, I am interested in the question: 'how is the Reformed theology and tradition appropriated in different contexts today?' At the same time, my own experiences of living and working abroad have enriched me and shaped my faith and theology in many respects: teaching was always also learning from Christians and non-Christians in other contexts. This leads me to my second research interest: how can local appropriations of Reformed theology enrich the worldwide Reformed family?[7] Several questions can be asked: how are Reformed theology and its traditions appropriated by theologians and believers in and across different socio-cultural and religious contexts today? What is the relation between these contexts and the appropriation of Reformed theology? What could Reformed Christians from different contexts learn from each other? How could the Reformed theology and traditions contribute to World Christianity and to our multireligious, multicultural and globalizing world?

1.2. Appropriation of the Reformed Tradition

The history and effects of Christian mission in general and also, more specifically, of Reformed missions have often been researched. Many studies are available on how, in the past, people in different contexts came to faith in Jesus Christ, how the Christian faith and local context collided, how Christian churches in non-Christian contexts came into existence and how a slow and gradual process of Christianization took place. These historical investigations are mainly based on written sources or physical artifacts. From these studies, we learn that it often takes decades or even centuries before an inculturated Christian faith or church comes into existence in a non-Christian context. We recognise the complex processes of syncretism and hybridization of the Christian faith in various contexts and how non-Christian religious views (continue to) impact Christians.

There is also literature available describing the acceptance of the Christian faith in non-Western contexts from the point of view of intercultural theology or from the point of view of local theologians.[8] Good overviews of the worldwide spread of the Reformed churches and Calvinism can also be found.[9]

Some more specific research with respect to the cross-cultural transmission of the Reformed faith and theology in non-Western contexts has been done.[10] These publications show the way in which

[7] The term 'appropriation' is used, as it expresses well the idea that both the message and the receiver change in the process of inculturation. Martien Brinkman called it 'double transformation': M.E. Brinkman, 'The Rediscovery of the Meaning of Baptism—Its Contribution to a Public Theology', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 2, no. 3 (1 August 2008): 272. For a broader explanation of the term 'appropriation' in this research see § 2.1.

[8] See, for example: Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Evangel Pub. House, 1979); Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001); Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004); Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004); Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004); Phan, *Christianities in Asia*; Felix Wilfred, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[9] See, for example: Jean-Jacques Bauswein and Lukas Vischer, *The Reformed Family Worldwide: A Survey of Reformed Churches, Theological Schools, and International Organizations*, International Reformed Center John Knox (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999); Herman J. Selderhuis, ed., *The Calvin Handbook* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009); Christoph Stückelberger and Reinhold Bernhardt, *Calvin Global: How Faith Influences Societies* (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009).

[10] Freerk Christiaans Kamma, *'Dit wonderlijke werk': het probleem van de communicatie tussen Oost en West gebaseerd op de ervaringen in het zendingswerk op Nieuw-Guinea (Irian Jaya), 1855-1972: een socio-missiologische benadering* (Oegstgeest: Raad voor de zending der Ned. Hervormde Kerk, 1977); J.P.D. Groen, *Kakuarumu: een vorm van zwarte magie* (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1991); C.J. Haak, *Het evangelie van Wofiya*

the Christian faith was transmitted through the missionaries and how local Reformed churches and confessions started to develop.
Even though some research has been done on the results of Reformed mission work or the situation in Reformed churches, this typically builds on reports of missionaries and local leaders or pastors.[11] However, the question of how Reformed believers in different contemporary contexts appropriate Reformed theology and tradition in their own lives and contexts and if, and how, the Reformed faith is relevant in, and for, the questions in their context has not yet been researched in a systematic way.[12] Viewing the state of the art, an empirical investigation of the appropriation of Reformed theology and tradition in contemporary contexts can contribute significantly to the mutual understanding and enrichment of the worldwide Reformed family today.

1.3. Infant Baptism in the Reformed Family: a Case Study

In this research, infant baptism as practised in Reformed and Presbyterian churches around the world has been chosen as a case study for investigating the functioning of the appropriation of Reformed theology and practice in various socio-religious contexts. We can name several reasons why this topic is well researchable:
1. Infant baptism as a theological subject and ecclesiastical practice was important for the formation of the Reformed identity in the sixteenth century and in many places it still functions today as an identity marker of Reformed and Presbyterian churches.[13] Most Reformed believers can, therefore, easily relate to it.
2. In Reformed churches worldwide, infant baptism is a sacrament and has a certain ritual form. I presume that there may be cultural-religious or social associations or parallels with other rites or rituals in various contexts: for example, a cleansing ritual, an initiation rite, or a symbolic washing... These visible and tangible aspects might offer a good opening for a conversation with Reformed believers in various contexts.
3. Infant baptism is a multi-faceted rite, which reflects core values of the Reformed theology and practice, as it points to forgiveness or washing of sin, indicates a personal relationship with God and Christ, and has a communal aspect of belonging to the church and the Christian family. Therefore, it is a rite to which the Reformed churches and believers may attribute different layers of meaning, affections and practices, which makes it a rich subject for research.
4. In infant baptism, as practised in the Reformed family, many theological topics come together: covenant, election, original sin, forgiveness, unity with Christ, adoption, renewal through the Holy Spirit… This could mean that infant baptism can be approached from various angles, which makes it easy for respondents to speak about it.
5. It is to be expected that most members of Reformed churches can easily relate to infant baptism because of personal experience in their own family or as church members. The visibility and tangibility of a church practice make it easier for believers to reflect upon than a more abstract topic.

(Zwolle: De Verre Naasten, 1989); J.A. Boersema, 'Huwelijksbetalingen: een antropologisch-ethisch onderzoek naar de bruidsprijs op Oost-Sumba' (Boekencentrum, 1997); A. J. de Visser, *Kyrios and Morena: The Lordship of Christ and African Township Christianity* (Pretoria: A.J. de Visser, 2001).

[11] Gerrit Roelof de Graaf has conducted an interesting historical research on the interaction between Reformed missionaries of the Reformed churches (liberated) and a specific group of Papua's, but he does not focus on the contextualization or appropriation of Reformed theology and tradition in the Papua context: G.R. de Graaf, *De wereld wordt omgekeerd: culturele interactie tussen de vrijgemaakt-gereformeerde zendelingen en zendingswerkers en de Papoea's van Boven Digoel (1956-1995)* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2012).

[12] See, for example: L. Onvlee and P.J. Luijendijk, *Cultuur als antwoord* ('s-Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 1973); John Louwerse, 'Una (West-New Guinea): Worldview and a Reformed Model for Contextualizing Cross-Cultural Communication of the Gospel' (1987); Pieter Holtrop and Jacqueline Vel, 'Evangelie en paraingu', in *De zending voorbij: terugblik op de relatie tussen de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland en de Christelijke Kerk van Sumba, 1942-1992*, ed. W. B. van Halsema (Kampen: Kok, 1995), 227–46.

[13] The questions of theologians who identify themselves with the Reformed tradition but reject infant baptism (for example, the classical adherents to 'The Second London Baptist Confession (1689)' and the current 'New Calvinists' (John Piper, Al Mohler, or Don Carson) cannot be dealt with here.

These considerations make infant baptism suitable as a topic and a case study for the appropriation of Reformed theology today.

1.4. Multiple-site Case Study: Three Contemporary Contexts

In order to understand the process of appropriation of Reformed theology and tradition, I will pursue an intercultural research in various different contemporary contexts. I believe that studying the same topic in diverse contexts can help to recognize elements of appropriation that would remain unnoticed in a single case study. The understanding of the various contexts can become mutually enriching and can open our eyes to our blind spots. It is clear that in a multiple-site case study it is impossible to discuss each of the contexts as deeply as in a single case study, but the advantage is that one specific theological topic is studied by bringing the understandings of several contexts into a conversation. This makes the research intercultural, as relating to the encounter and engagement of two or more cultures or contexts.[14]

The empirical research has been conducted in Reformed congregations in three different contexts: Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Nkhoma Synod (Central Malawi), Reformed Presbyterian Church of India (North India) and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.[15] The reasons for choosing these contexts are both criteria-based and convenience-based:[16]

1. North India — several congregations of the RPCI and the Presbyterian-Reformed community connected with the local Presbyterian Theological Seminary. The RPCI is situated in a post-colonial, multi-religious context, with a strong Hindu majority, while Reformed Christianity forms but a small minority. I have personal contacts with several teachers at the Seminary (among them also two professors in intercultural theology), with several Indian PhD students who are conducting research in the field of intercultural theology, as well as with local pastors, who are willing to help me facilitate the empirical research.
2. Central Malawi — the CCAP (Nkhoma Synod) also functions in a post-colonial context, but with a large Christian majority, with a well-established Reformed / Presbyterian church since the 19th century. The presence of African Traditional Religion is tangible and the worldview of the people is affected by that. The reason for including the CCAP Nkhoma is that I was looking for an African Reformed church where I would be able to make connections and do research. I have personal contacts with theology teachers and pastors in the CCAP Nkhoma, who are willing to help me set up the empirical research and give feedback on my findings.
3. The Netherlands — the RCN is situated in a context in which the Reformed church has been the national church for a long time but which has changed significantly, especially in the last century.

The reasons for also including the Dutch context in this research are:

- to take my own context as a research object expresses an openness to learn from others and a readiness to evaluate the appropriation in my own context, as well; some non-Western researchers rightly observe that religion in African and Asian contexts is often studied as an 'object' by people from the West, without bringing their own context into the discussion.[17]
- to objectify my own theological situation and position; in this way, I express my openness to reflect on the appropriation of infant baptism in my own context in a manner comparable to the other contexts and to try to view my own context as if through the eyes of another.[18]

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[14] See for methodological explanation of multiple-site case-studies § 2.5.1.

[15] I will refer to these churches with the following abbreviations:
- Reformed Presbyterian Church of India - RPCI
- Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Nkhoma Synod — CCAP Nkhoma
- Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated) - RCN

[16] Robert E. Stake, "Qualitative Case Studies," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA etc: Sage, 2005), 450–51.

[17] Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, 'Of Africanised Bees and Africanised Churches: Ten Theses on African Christianity', *Missionalia* 38, no. 3 (1 November 2010): 369–79.

[18] Theo Sundermeier, 'Die Begegnung mit dem Fremden. Plädoyer für eine Hermeneutik des Vertrauens', in *Die Begegnung mit Fremden und das Geschichtsbewusstsein*, ed. Judith Becker and Bettina Braun (Göttingen, Deutschland: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 38.

- to enhance the relevance of my research, as the result will also touch upon the theology and practice in my own context.

1.5. Calvin's appropriation of infant baptism in the 16th-century Genevan Context: a Historical Voice

My research interest is to gain a better understanding of the appropriation of Reformed theology and traditions in the worldwide Reformed family. The research focuses on infant baptism as a case study and asks how this practice functions among Reformed churches and believers in various contemporary contexts ('synchronic'). However, I also add a 'diachronic' angle to the research. I follow Hiebert, who writes that 'churches in different cultural and historical contexts must test their theologies with the international community of churches and the church down through the ages'.[19] It would exceed the limits of this monography to give a historical overview of the various developments of the theology and practices of infant baptism in the history of the Reformed family.[20] However, I listen to Calvin's voice as an example of how, in the early period of the Reformed theology and tradition, infant baptism was understood and practised.

By bringing Calvin's voice into the conversation, I do not want to suggest that he should be regarded as the unique or even the main progenitor of the Reformed family.[21] However, I take into account that in the collective memory of the Reformed churches, Calvin is one of the most well-known and most-referred representatives of the worldwide Reformed tradition.[22] In each of the three research contexts, Calvin is regarded as an important representative of the Reformed tradition, with which the respondents self-identify. This was most explicit in North India and Malawi, where a doctoral dissertation from a Malawian church historian traces the history of the CCAP Nkhoma straight back to Calvin. Dutch publications on being Reformed in the Dutch context show the same historical affinity with Calvin's theology, also with respect to baptism.[23] International ecumenical Reformed

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[19] Paul G. Hiebert, 'Metatheology: The Step Beyond Contextualization', in *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapid, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1994), 393. Cortez writes: 'a truly contextual theology must dialogue not only with the contemporary context but with historical contexts as well' in: Marc Cortez, 'Creation and Context: A Theological Framework for Contextual Theology', *Westminster Theological Journal* 67, no. 2 (2005): 392.

[20] See, for example: W. van 't Spijker et al., eds., *Rondom de doopvont: leer en gebruik van de heilige doop in het Nieuwe Testament en in de geschiedenis van de westerse kerk* (Goudriaan: De Groot, 1983); Marcel Barnard, 'Doop en belijdenis', in *De weg van de liturgie: tradities, achtergronden, praktijk*, ed. N.A Schuman and Paul Oskamp, 4th ed. (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2008), 281–302.

[21] Calvin was a second-generation Reformer, who was not unique, but was drawing on many others in a very creative and systematic way. See, e.g. Richard A. Muller, 'Demoting Calvin: The Issue of Calvin and the Reformed Tradition', in *John Calvin, Myth and Reality: Images and Impact of Geneva's Reformer. Papers of the 2009 Calvin Studies Society Colloquium*, ed. Amy Nelson Burnett (Eugene, Or: Cascade Books, 2011), 3–17. On the diversity in the Reformed family already in the sixteenth century: Opitz, *The Myth of the Reformation*; Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed*; Van den Brink and Smits, 'Reformed Stance'; Nimmo and Fergusson, *The Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology*.

[22] Herman Selderhuis, 'Calvinism as Reformed Protestantism: Clarification of a Term', in *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism. Studies in Honor of Richard A. Muller on the Maturation of a Theological Tradition*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor, David Sytsma, and Jason Zuidema, vol. 170, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions (Brill Academic Publishers, 2013), 734. See for a reflection on Calvin's place in the Dutch Reformed collective memory: Herman Paul, 'Johannes Calvijn', in *Het gereformeerde geheugen: protestantse herinneringsculturen in Nederland, 1850-2000*, ed. George Harinck, Herman Paul, and Bart Wallet (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2009), 41–50.

[23] See for:

- RPCI India: F-9:8; teacher; 30+ / F-13:1; teacher; 30+
- CCAP Nkhoma Malawi: Rhodian Munyenyembe, *A History of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) as a Federative Denomination (1924-2015)* (Bloemfontein, South Africa: University of the Free State, 2015), viii; 11f.; 252f.; 279.
- RCN (The Netherlands): Koert van Bekkum, 'Einde van Het Gereformeerde Christendom in Zicht?', in *Toekomst Voor de Gereformeerde Traditie*, ed. Koert van Bekkum (Barneveld, Nederland: Nederlands Dagblad, 2004), 11–17; Jochem Douma, *Common Grace in Kuyper, Schilder, and Calvin: Exposition, Comparison, and*

organisations to which the churches of the respondents belong, also explicitly refer to Calvin's theology and heritage.[24] In this way, Calvin functions for the Reformed respondents as a shared point of reference for theological and practical aspects of infant baptism.
From a methodological point of view, Calvin's voice also functions as an orientation point for reflection on the appropriation of infant baptism today. As will be described in chapter six, Calvin was re-forming and appropriating the theology and practice of infant baptism as it functioned in the Roman Catholic church of his time and context. It was Calvin's conviction that infant baptism was believed and practised from the Early Church on, but needed to be re-formed or re-appropriated in and for the Reformed church in Geneva under construction. He strived to do so in discussion with Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anabaptist and fellow Reformed theologians and in a socio-political context that was at times very reluctant to follow his reformational ideas.
Finally, I made a deliberate choice to place the discussion of Calvin's Genevan practice of infant baptism after the chapters in which the field research is described. The same order is used in the intercultural conversation in chapter seven: I am taking my starting point in the actual field research and subsequently turning to the historical voice of Calvin. The reason for this is that I am not using Calvin as a normative voice, but am reading him through the eyes of today's Reformed believers from North India, Central Malawi and the Netherlands, which sometimes results in refreshing insights.[25]

1.6. Reformed Theology and Tradition: Some Characteristics

This research is about the appropriation[26] of Reformed theology and tradition by believers in different contexts. Here, I will shortly describe how I use the term 'Reformed'. From the outset, it is clear what Van den Brink and Smits state that the Reformed tradition has a 'remarkable diversity and plurality, acknowledging similarities and differences from a synchronic point of view as well as continuities and discontinuities from a diachronic perspective'.[27] An important characteristic of Reformed theology and tradition is its context sensitivity, which is already visible in the substantial number of Reformed confessions from the 16th century until today.[28] It is also reflected in the principle '*Ecclesia reformata quia semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*'.[29] The authority of the Word of God is the central force, guiding the church in changing contexts and times. Paas and Schaeffer observe: 'It is not a principle that glorifies change in itself; it contains a norm, the Word of God. Reformation is not a matter of ever-new formations; it is a matter of constant re-formation — or reconstruction. We could call this the "restorative principle" of the Reformation.'[30] Van den Brink and Smits mention three aspects of this central notion:

Evaluation (Hamilton, Canada: Lucerna: Crts Publications, 2017); C. Trimp, *Klank en weerklank. Door prediking tot geloofservaring* (Barneveld, Nederland: Vuurbaak, 1989).

[24] 1. World Communion of Reformed Churches - http://wcrc.ch/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Brochure-English.pdf. CCAP Nkhoma is a member.
2. International Conference of Reformed Churches - https://www.icrconline.com . RPCI is a member, while the RCN belongs to the founders of this organization.
3. World Reformed Fellowship - https://wrf.global/about. Theologians from the RCPI and the RCN are members.

[25] See, for example: § 7.3.3.3, § 7.4.2, § 7.4.3.3 and § 8.1.2.

[26] See for a definition of this term § 2.1 below.

[27] Van den Brink and Smits, 'Reformed Stance', 335. See also: Wallace M. Alston and Michael Welker, eds., *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2003); Wallace M. Alston and Michael Welker, eds., *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity II : Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007); Eberhard Busch, *Reformiert. Profil Einer Konfession.* (Zürich, 2007).

[28] Jan Rohls, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften. Von Zürich bis Barmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987). See also: Stefan Paas and Hans Schaeffer, 'Reconstructing Reformed Identity. Experiences from Church Planting in the Netherlands', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 8, no. 4 (1 January 2014): 393.

[29] Here I follow the line of thinking of Van den Brink and Smits, 'Reformed Stance', 341ff.

[30] Paas and Schaeffer, 'Reconstructing Reformed Identity', 391.

1. The theocentric character of the classical Reformed tradition: God's sovereignty and our calling as humans to know Him and to live for His glory is a basic tenet of the Reformed faith and spirituality.[31]
2. 'The deep-seated wish to let the Word of God — and the Word of God alone — determine the church's faith and life.'[32] Not just *'sola Scriptura'*, but also *'tota Scriptura'*. The Reformed tradition is characterised by a thorough study of, and obedience to, both the Old and the New Testament.[33]
3. 'It evokes the image of an ongoing movement in which ever more domains of life are brought under the dominion of God's will. (…) in ever-changing circumstances the search for implementing God's will is pertinent.'[34] This is only possible because of the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We take our starting point in the observation that, in different periods of time, as well as in different Western and non-Western contexts, a broad variety of Christians and churches self-identify as] 'Reformed'.[35] In this research, I use the metaphor of the 'Reformed family' as a reference to this unity in diversity.[36] The 'family' metaphor shows the natural and often historical relationships existing between local and national churches and it also contains the notion of historical development and growth, new local appropriations, as well as the growing apart of certain branches of the family tree because of new affiliations. The term 'family' is not precise and reflects the fact that it is hard to give a clear definition of the Reformed tradition. The Reformed theology and tradition was, first and foremost, a living family tradition, shaped and reshaped in concrete ecclesiastical contexts, through fierce discussions and persecutions. It is also *'semper reformanda'*: Puritanism, Neo-Calvinism and today's New Calvinism all self-identify with the Reformed tradition, but are also appropriating the Reformed heritage afresh in, and for, their changing social-religious contexts, where they are having to respond to new questions and challenges.
Even though the research contexts are different in many respects, the starting point of the research is that the classical Reformed tradition forms the shared theological framework in which the respondents in the research contexts position themselves. This framework has a historical (diachronic) and ecumenical (synchronic) dimension. From a diachronic perspective, the Ecumenical Creeds and the Reformed confessions function as hermeneutical lenses through which Reformed Christians read the Scriptures. The contributions of theologians like John Calvin, too, are important to the research contexts.[37] From a synchronic perspective, the intercultural conversation with Reformed theologians and ordinary believers from different contexts expresses participation in the Reformed family, which is in turn part of the worldwide Body of Christ.

1.7. Research Question and Sub-Questions

The main research question for this project is:
What does the appropriation of infant baptism by Reformed believers in different contexts teach us about the possibilities and challenges for doing Reformed theology interculturally today?

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[31] Van den Brink and Smits, 'Reformed Stance', 344. See also: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 1559 ed. (Philadelphia; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), I.1.
[32] Van den Brink and Smits, 'Reformed Stance', 342.
[33] See for a contemporary Reformed discussion of the questions around the 'sola Scriptura' principle: Hans Burger, Arnold Huijgen, and Eric Peels, eds., *Sola Scriptura: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Scripture, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, vol. 32, Studies in Reformed Theology (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2017).
[34] van den Brink and Smits, 'Reformed Stance', 344–45.
[35] See e.g. M.E. Brinkman, 'Unity and Diversity. Reformed and Ecumenical', *KIATS Theological Journal* 1, no. 2 (2005), http://dare.ubvu.vu.nl/handle/1871/10885. With respect to liturgy and baptism: Lukas Vischer, *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches. Past and Present*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003).
[36] This expression is borrowed from Bauswein and Vischer, *The Reformed Family Worldwide*; Alan P.F. Sell, 'The Reformed Family Today: Some Theological Reflections', in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 433–41.
[37] See for Calvin above § 1.5. In all research contexts, the normativity of the Reformed confessions as a hermeneutical lens for reading the Scriptures is mentioned in the church orders.

The following sub-questions are derived from this:
1. How is the Reformed theology and practice of infant baptism appropriated by Reformed believers in North India, Central Malawi and the Netherlands today?
2. How was the theology and practice of infant baptism appropriated in the historical context of Calvin's Geneva?
3. What are the similarities and differences in the Reformed appropriations of infant baptism in the researched contemporary contexts against the background of the 16th and 17th-century Reformed tradition?
4. What can be learned from the different appropriations for a Reformed theology and practice of infant baptism?
5. What can be learned from the intercultural conversation on infant baptism for doing Reformed theology interculturally today?

The research questions address the appropriation of infant baptism among Reformed believers and all the respondents are Reformed believers who have personal experience with infant baptism, either as parents or as congregation members. While I am aware of the fact that not all Reformed Christians are in favour of infant baptism, the theological discussion about the legitimacy of infant baptism will not be part of this research. My research interest is not to discuss different opinions on the legality or validity of infant baptism, but to describe and analyse appropriations of the theology and practice of infant baptism in various contexts. For that reason, I will pay attention only to the discussion on the legitimacy of infant baptism if the interviews touch upon this topic.[38]

1.8. Research Strategy

To find an answer to the research questions, I use qualitative research methods as the main research strategy. As Hennink, Hutter and Bailey state: '…one of the main distinctive features of qualitative research is that the approach allows you to identify issues from the perspective of your study participants, and understand the meanings and interpretations that they give to behaviour, events or objects.'[39] Miles and Huberman contend, that 'qualitative data, with their emphasis on people's lived experiences, are fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them.'[40]
In this research, the appropriation of the Reformed theology and practice of infant baptism functions as a case study for doing Reformed theology interculturally.[41] The research has an explorative character: I am not formulating or testing a hypothesis, but I intend to map and analyse intercultural appropriations of Reformed theology in different contexts.[42] Part of the research is to develop a methodological framework for describing, analysing and comparing various intercultural appropriations in different contexts.[43] I will then bring the research contexts into a conversation, trusting that we can mutually learn from the similarities and differences between the appropriations in the research contexts.
While the final goal is not to homogenize or assimilate different appropriations into something like a universally applied theology and practice of infant baptism, from a methodological point of view I expect a certain degree of unity in diversity, because the research is done among Reformed

[38] See for this choice: Dimitri Mortelmans, *Handboek kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden* (Leuven; Den Haag: Acco, 2013), 154f..
[39] Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2010), 9.
[40] Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (SAGE Publications, 2013), 11.
[41] C. Hermans and W. J. Schoeman, 'The Utility of Practical Theology: Mapping the Domain, Goals, Strategies and Criteria of Practical Theological Research', *Acta Theologica* 35 (2015): 14.
[42] Christoph K. Streb, 'Exploratory Case Study', in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, ed. Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Eurepos, and Elden Wiebe (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2009).
[43] This will be described and explained in chapter 2.

believers, who share the framework of Reformed theology and tradition.[44] Various appropriations can, of course, be different, but I treat such differences first of all as potential sources for mutual learning and enrichment in the Reformed tradition. However, in the intercultural conversation, shared attention to God, the canonical Scriptures and the Reformed tradition also creates an opportunity for a critical evaluation of various appropriations.

1.9 Research Methodology

In order to find an answer to my research question, I have chosen to do a combination of field research and desk research as the main research strategy. For the description of the research contexts and for interpreting the relation between the empirical data and the cultural-religious contexts, I use literature research. For collecting, analysing and comparing the empirical data I do field research while using qualitative research methods, especially qualitative interviewing and qualitative data analysis.[45] The reason for this choice is, as expressed by Hennink, Hutter and Bailey: '…one of the main distinctive features of qualitative research is that the approach allows you to identify issues from the perspective of your study participants, and understand the meanings and interpretations that they give to behaviour, events or objects.'[46] In order to understand the appropriation of the theology and practice of infant baptism by Reformed believers, I need to understand why believers bring their children to baptism, what meanings and beliefs they attribute to this rite, what they believe to take place in baptism, what they hope and expect from it, how it affects their lives and the lives of their children. Miles and Huberman state, that 'qualitative data, with their emphasis on people's lived experiences, are fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them.'[47]

As far as I am aware, intercultural research about infant baptism among Reformed believers has not yet been conducted, which means that my research will have an explorative character. For this purpose, qualitative research (especially personal and group interviews) seems to be the most useful approach. I choose to conduct, first of all, semi-structured interviews, because in this way respondents participate in the research as 'agents' who are invited to share their knowledge in speaking about God. Finally, the goal of the research is to observe, analyse and bring various contexts into a conversation, in order to mutually learn from each other.[48] An intercultural conversation can also lead to critical reactions with respect to local appropriations, which can help pastors, theology teachers and ordinary believers to reflect on their current appropriations and to discuss if and how they could re-calibrate these appropriations and relate these to the broader Reformed theological framework.

1.10. Doing Intercultural Theological Research

This research is positioned in the theological discipline of intercultural theology. Benno van den Toren characterizes intercultural theology as 'a theology of the worldwide church as the body of Christ in which different cultural and social expressions of the Christian faith come into conversation. (…) This involves practice, encounters within the global body of Christ, in sharing faith in Christ across social and cultural boundaries and through in-depth interreligious encounter.'[49]

Some aspects of my understanding of intercultural theology, as practised in this research, are the following:

1. In doing theology, we seek to relate God's self-revelation in the canonical Scriptures and in Jesus Christ to the human heart, daily life and the existential questions believers face. I believe that

[44] Clara E. Hill, Barbara J. Thompson, and Elizabeth Nutt Williams, 'A Guide to Conducting Consensual Qualitative Research', *The Counseling Psychologist* 25, no. 4 (1 October 1997): 521f.

[45] J. C. Evers, ed., *Kwalitatief interviewen: kunst én kunde*, 2e druk (Amsterdam: Boom Lemma uitgevers, 2015); Jeanine Evers, *Kwalitatieve analyse: kunst én kunde* (Boom Lemma uitgevers, 2015).

[46] Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 9.

[47] Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 11.

[48] See below § 2.4 for a methodological explanation.

[49] Van den Toren, 'Significance of Postcolonial Thinking'.

theology is faith, searching for understanding, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which strives for a 'transformational correlation between the Bible and life for the sake of advancing God's reign in Christ' (Vanhoozer).[50]

2. Theology is a human response to God's universal self-revelation, which comes to us through the canonical Scriptures and the incarnated Christ.[51] By doing theology, trained theologians and ordinary believers express their culturally embedded understanding of God's self-revelation in Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I understand theology not as a private enterprise, but as an endeavour in the community of the church as the worldwide Body of Christ.

3. In doing intercultural theology we 'engage in dialogue with theological expressions from different parts of the Global Church.'[52] Van den Toren characterizes this as a 'three-way conversation', in which 'the conversation partners are brought together by their joint attention for God, as He revealed Himself in the canonical Scriptures as the object — or subject — that brings the conversation partners together.' [53]

4. In my understanding, intercultural theology should be Christ-centred, because we wish, not only to gain a deeper mutual understanding as members of the Body of Christ, but also to 'comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God' (Eph. 3: 18-19).[54]

5. In line with Vanhoozer, I believe that the diversity of expressions of the Christian faith related to God's revelation can be appreciated as a 'polyphonic theology' in which multiple voices are brought together: 'the objective textual meaning is best approximated by a diversity of reading contexts and communities'.[55] It is exactly in, and through, their diversity and local relevance that contextual theologies can make a contribution to the whole of global Christianity.[56] Intercultural conversations can make us aware of our 'cultural blinkers' and contribute to faithful appropriations of the Gospel for contemporary Christians, and the discovery of new or neglected aspects of the Christian faith and practices across contexts.

6. In intercultural theology, there is also a place for critical evaluation of local appropriations of the Gospel. In the case of our research, we do this in light of the shared theological framework of the canonical Scriptures and the Reformed confessions. In terms of Kevin Vanhoozer's concept of the 'drama of doctrine',[57] Reformed theology can be seen as a normative 'script', while the dramatic performances of the script can be observed in the contextual appropriations by Reformed Christians.

7. Intercultural theology also strives for a critical consideration of the relationship between the sociocultural context and Christian theology, as not all performances or appropriations are equally constructive, fruitful or faithful. This is done by facilitating, and engaging in, intercultural

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[50] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Theological Method', in *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church*, ed. William A. Dyrness et al. (Downers Grove, Ill.; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 889.

[51] Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1994), 88f.; Benno van den Toren, 'Can We See the Naked Theological Truth?', in *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*, ed. Matthew Cook and Rob Haskell (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2010), 91–108. See for the character of God's revelation: Benno van den Toren, *Christian Apologetics as Cross-Cultural Dialogue* (London; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011), 138f.

[52] Benno van den Toren, 'Intercultural Theology as a Three-Way Conversation', *Exchange* 44, no. 2 (2015): 123.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Andrew F. Walls, 'The Ephesian Moment. At a Crossroads in Christian History', in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 72–81. See also Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 4; David Smith, *Mission after Christendom* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003), 60.

[55] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapid, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 419f.

[56] Walls, 'Ephesian Moment'; William A. Dyrness and Oscar Garcia-Johnson, *Theology without Borders: An Introduction to Global Conversations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015).

[57] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

conversations between representatives from various socio-religious contexts, and by involving both trained theologians and ordinary believers[58] in the conversation.[59] Here we also profit from the empirical and ethnographic methods as used, for example, in the research of 'ordinary theology'.[60]

1.11. Positionality of the Researcher

In order to be transparent about my own positionality as a researcher, I would now like to reflect briefly on my personal involvement in the topic of infant baptism in my private and professional life.

1.11.1. Autobiographical Notes

Born in a traditional Reformed (RCN) family in 1959, I was baptized on the second Sunday following my birth. For that occasion, I was clothed in a white baptismal gown, which had been made from my mother's wedding dress. At that time, baptizing on the second Sunday was still acceptable, as the ideal for many RCN parents was that a child should be baptized on the first Sunday, for the rule was: 'as soon as possible'. The theological reason was that one should not make the almighty God of the covenant wait to give the precious gift of the promise of baptism to the infants.[61] Such an early baptism could imply that the mother was not able to be present, but the presence of the father as the head of the family was decisive and he could eventually make the baptismal vow alone, even though, in practice, the task of 'raising a child in the Lord' would primarily come down to the mother.

In 1983, I married Marlies and we were blessed with four children, who were all baptized after some weeks. In the 1990s, we lived and worked for five years in Hungary and participated actively in the church life of the local Hungarian Reformed church. There, while many of the parents who had their child baptized were not active members of the congregation, belonging to the Reformed church was valued by many young parents and infant baptism was the traditional way to connect the child to this Reformed community.

From 1997-2000, I served as a pastor in a local RCN congregation with many young families and children, who were typically baptized by sprinkling one or two months after they were born. The parents would invite family members, but sometimes also non-Reformed relatives, friends or neighbours. From 2001-2013, we lived in Ukraine and were involved in the theological training of Reformed pastors and Sunday school teachers. In Ukraine, infant baptism is practised by the Orthodox churches, to which the majority of Christians in Ukrainian society belong. Baptism in Orthodox churches is done by immersion of the child and is performed in a church building or, as the case may be, at home. Most Protestant churches are Evangelical-Baptist and reject infant baptism, baptizing adults by immersion. For the Reformed churches in Ukraine, baptizing the children of the believers was an identity marker in relation to the Baptist-Evangelical churches, but, differently to the Orthodox churches, it is performed in a Western style, through sprinkling.

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[58] I use the term 'ordinary believer' in the sense of 'a believer without formal theological training' (including, but not specifically focusing on, 'poor', 'marginalized' or 'oppressed' believers). However, neither the group of 'trained theologians', nor the group of 'ordinary believers' is homogenous. See for a broader discussion of the terminology, among others: Eric Anum, 'Ye Ma Wo Mo! African Hermeneuts, You Have Spoken at Last: Reflections on Semeia 73 (1996)', in *Reading Other-Wise: Socially Engaged Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities*, ed. Gerald O. West, Semeia 62 (Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 7–18; Hans de Wit, 'Through the Eyes of Another. Objectives and Backgrounds', in *Through The Eyes Of Another: Intercultural Reading Of The Bible*, ed. Hans de Wit et al. (Elkhart, Ind: Inst of Mennonite Studies, 2005), 5f.

[59] Van den Toren, 'Three-Way Conversation', 3.

[60] See Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis, *Exploring Ordinary Theology Everyday Christian Believing and the Church* (Farnham, Surrey, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013); Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot [etc.: Ashgate, 2002). See for the methodology below § 2.3.3.

[61] It would be interesting to know whether there were also other reasons for such an early baptism ('*vroegdoop*'), but that goes beyond the limits of this research.

1.11.2. The Researcher as Research Instrument

Doing qualitative research has a subjective element, because the researcher is also a research instrument:

a. My ontological stance or positionality in this research is multi-layered. I met with respondents as humans, created in the image of God, I also share with the respondents the Christian faith, and the belonging to the worldwide Reformed family. In most interviews, this gave a personal connection and it created a basic trust from the outset, which was an important condition for fruitful interviewing and open conversations. Instead of trying to take a neutral position, I believe that my Reformed identity matches well with the research topic, as well as with the respondents, with whom I share many Reformed theological convictions.[62]

b. At the same time, I do realise that I am a white, Dutch, male person, am older than many of my respondents and, as a Reformed pastor and teacher, have more knowledge of the research topic than most of the respondents, because I have been working on it for years. This means that I had to be aware of any possible form of violence which would reduce the respondents to mere objects. I strove to see my respondents as participants in my research, striving for transparency about the goals of the interviews and trying to show integrity in the way in which I relate to the respondents and how I used the information collected from them (research data).

c. During the field research, the fact that I, as a researcher, also belong to the Reformed family with which the respondents self-identify was helpful. Especially when introducing myself in North India and Malawi, the fact that I was also Reformed allowed respondents to trust me more easily as an interviewer.

d. I am aware that the different aspects of the research design are orchestrated by the researcher. I conducted the field research on the basis of my personal professional experience, research interest and knowledge of Reformed theology. In the words of Brodsky: 'analysis, interpretation, and meaning-making come from the researcher, using all of her or his personal and professional skills, training, knowledge, and experience as an instrument to produce a coherent authentic picture of the research as the researcher saw and experienced it.'[63] Here I strove to avoid any form of representational or epistemic violence (Gayatri Spivak) and to listen to different voices, specifically including the espoused voices of ordinary believers.[64] Asking for feedback from local insiders and experts on my findings in the field research, helped me to reflect on my own personal involvement in the research and to fine-tune and balance the interpretation of the data.[65]

1.12. Relevance of the Research

An empirical investigation of the appropriation of the Reformed tradition in contemporary contexts has not before been pursued in a systematic way and may be a valuable contribution to the understanding of how the Reformed tradition is actually lived by Reformed believers in different contexts. This research does not pretend to offer any general overview of how Reformed theology is appropriated in non-Western contexts. But I hope that, by researching and analysing the Reformed theology and practice of infant baptism as a case study, I can offer a first exploration of how the appropriation of the Reformed tradition in two non-Western contexts takes place.

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[62] See, for reflection on the place of the religious identity of the researcher in anthropology and ethnography: Joel Robbins, 'Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?', *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 32 (2006): 285–94; Eloise Meneses, 'Religiously Engaged Ethnography: Reflections of a Christian Anthropologist Studying Hindus in India and Nepal', *Ethnos. Journal of Anthropology*, 2019, 4f, doi:10.1080/00141844.2019.1641126.

[63] Anne E Brodsky, 'Researcher as Instrument', in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008), 766.

[64] Kristie Dotson, 'Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing', *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 238–57, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23016544. See also: Leonardo Zeus and Ricky Lee Allen, 'Ideology', in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008).

[65] See below § 2.9 for information on data management.

With the research project at hand, I also hope to contribute to the development of the discipline of Intercultural Theology.

Firstly, this research has academic relevance because even though intercultural theological research has been done, empirical research in three different contexts has not been performed in this way before. This research has an explorative character, as I developed and tested a methodology for doing intercultural field research. The intercultural theological conversation as staged in chapter seven shows that such a methodology is possible and fruitful.

Secondly, the project has intercultural theological relevance, as it contributes to the understanding of the relation between the socio-cultural environment and the appropriation of infant baptism by Reformed believers in various contexts. In other words, it investigates how the *'semper reformanda'* principle functions in the worldwide Reformed family.

Thirdly, the research is also an attempt to practise intercultural Reformed catholicity in a global age, by asking how the various appropriations of infant baptism in the worldwide Reformed family could mutually enrich each other and bring believers from different places to a deeper and fuller understanding of God's grace in and through the practice of infant baptism. This could also be a Reformed contribution to World Christianity (in line with Wall's 'Ephesian Moment').[66]

Fourthly, there is also an intercultural theological relevance to this research, as I wish, through this multiple-site intercultural case study,[67] to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and possibilities for doing Reformed theology interculturally by asking what lessons could be learned from this research for doing comparable empirical research on other theological subjects.

Finally, I hope that this research will also make a contribution to demonstrating how an intercultural exploration and conversation can be conducted in appreciating similarities and differences among different contexts, in the light of the canonical Scriptures and listening to the voice of the Reformed confessions. The research will focus on just one aspect of Reformed theology, but I hope that the in-depth intercultural study of this topic can be used to gain a broader perspective on how Reformed theology and tradition are appropriated in various contexts.[68]

[66] Walls, 'Ephesian Moment'.

[67] See below § 2.5.1 for a methodological explanation.

[68] Peter van der Veer, *The Value of Comparison* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 9.

2. Researching the Appropriation of Infant Baptism. Methodological Framework and Technical Design

The main goal of this project is to gain a deeper knowledge of how Reformed theology is appropriated in different contexts and to understand how an intercultural conversation could enrich the worldwide Reformed family in the context of World Christianity. The field research on the appropriation of the Reformed rite of infant baptism functions as a case study to show the possibilities and limitations of doing Reformed theology interculturally.
In this chapter, I would like to describe and define the methodological framework guiding the research project. I wish to discuss:
a. The concept of 'appropriation', which I use to characterize the hermeneutical process through which the theology and the practice of infant baptism are received and contextualized in different times and contexts;
b. The model of 'believing, belonging, behaving and experiencing' (BBBE model), which I designed for the description and analysis of the empirical data and use as an operationalisation of the concept of appropriation;
c. An adapted model of the 'Four Voices of Theology', which was originally designed by Helen Cameron and others[1] and helps to obtain a rich picture of the various Reformed appropriations of infant baptism, in which I listen to the voices of pastors, ordinary believers and the Reformed confessions;
d. The concept of 'intercultural conversation', as a way of practising intercultural theology;
e. Finally, I will describe the technical design of my research: a multiple case study on the appropriation of infant baptism in three contexts, which has a diachronic anchor in the theology and practice of infant baptism in Calvin's Geneva.

2.1. 'Appropriation': Definition and Application

'Appropriation' comes from the Latin *appropriare*, which means 'to make one's own'.[2] In a general sense, 'to appropriate' means that words, ideas, objects or practices are used outside of the original context. Although it keeps its original meaning, at least partly, what is appropriated also receives new meanings and connotations in the new context. The term 'appropriation' is used in different ways:
- in a historical perspective, 'appropriation' can mean 're-interpretation', a more or less conscious refurbishing of older ideas or practices for a new or changed context, for example, the appropriation of Calvin's theology by Scholten, Kuyper and Bavinck[3]
- 'appropriation' can refer to an individual acceptance of the salvation in Christ, which can also entail a (sudden) subjective and heart-felt faith experience as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer[4]
- 'appropriation' can also have a negative meaning, when referring to a 'theft' of elements, for example, taken from a minority culture by a dominant culture[5]

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[1] Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, and Catherine Duce, *Talking About God in Practice* (London: Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd, 2010), 53f.
[2] Richard A. Rogers, 'From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation', *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (2006): 475.
[3] James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 189.
[4] Jerald C. Brauer, 'Conversion: From Puritanism To Revivalism', *Journal of Religion*, no. 58 (1978): 234.
[5] See, e.g. Conrad G. Brunk and James O. Young (eds), *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

- in a missionary context, appropriation can be understood as an equivalent of 'inculturation' or 'contextualization' of the Gospel[6], or a cross-cultural 'diffusion of the faith'.[7] In the process of translation of the faith, new meanings emerge, while older notions become less important or even get lost.[8] The process of appropriation can be more reflexive (with conscious choices) as well as more intuitive (for example, guided by dreams or visions)[9]
- finally, in an ecumenical and intercultural setting Hans de Wit and other also speak about 'appropriation' with regard to intercultural reading and application of Scripture.[10]

A working definition of appropriation in this research would be: 'Appropriation is the process in which ideas or practices from one context are received by humans or groups in another context through a process of conscious or unconscious selection and (re)construction'.[11] In other words: appropriation is a process of adaptation and transformation by pastors and theologians, as well as by ordinary believers, to make sense of Reformed theology and practices in, and for, their local context. Fresh appropriations should, foremost, have local relevance as 'faith, searching understanding', but eventually also enrich (or criticize) other appropriations and contexts.[12] It is this interest in, and hope for, mutual enrichment that motivates this research.

2.1.1. Appropriation and Meeting the Other

As indicated above: 'appropriation' implies the agency[13] of the participants in an intercultural encounter. For a hermeneutical reflection on this aspect of appropriation, I use insights of Ricoeur, Vanhoozer and Sundermeier.
Firstly, Ricoeur used the term 'appropriation' to explain the hermeneutical and critical process of understanding texts. He uses insights from both hermeneutics and critical theory. Hermeneutics asks the question of how meaning is shaped historically and contextually, while critical theory tries to

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[6] Klaas Bom and Benno van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity in the Science and Religion Debate: Intercultural Contributions from French-Speaking Africa*, *Context and Catholicity in the Science and Religion Debate* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2020), 151f.
[7] Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002).
[8] See also: Van den Toren, 'Can We See the Naked Theological Truth?'
[9] Wrogemann also uses the term 'Aneignung' or 'appropriation', but for him this is first of all an 'intuitive' form of 'inculturation'. Henning Wrogemann, *Interkulturelle Theologie Und Hermeneutik: Grundfragen, Aktuelle Beispiele, Theoretische Perspektiven* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2012), 282. I use the term in a broader and more general sense, for both reflexive and intuitive forms of 'inculturation'.
[10] Wit, Hans de, *Empirical Hermeneutics, Interculturality, and Holy Scripture*. Vol. 1. Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics Series. (Indiana, USA: Foundation Dom Hélder Câmara Chair, VU University Amsterdam, 2012), p. 19f.
[11] Adapted from Kees van der Kooi, 'Calvin, Modern Calvinism, and Civil Society. The Appropriation of a Heritage, with Particular Reference to the Low Countries', in *Calvin and His Influence, 1509-2009*, eds Irena Backus and Philip Benedict (New York [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 2011), 267–68. A comparable definition is given by Willem Frijhoff, 'Toe-eigening: van bezitsdrang naar betekenisgeving', *Trajecta. Tijdschrijft voor de geschiedenis van het katholiek leven in de Nederlanden* 6, no. 2 (1997): 108, http://depot.lias.be/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE4618767. See also: Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), ix.
[12] Robert J. Schreiter and Edward Schillebeeckx, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1985), ch. 2; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, '"One Rule to Rule Them All?" Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity', in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, eds Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 107.
[13] Flett refers to Webb Keane's warning that the concept of 'agency' is from a Western intellectual and individualist tradition and its intercultural use should be handled with caution. John G. Flett, *Apostolicity. The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2016), 173–74, footnote 107.

trace deformations in communication and understanding caused by ideology and power disbalance. For intercultural communication, both aspects are important.[14]

According to Ricoeur, appropriation demands a 'dialectic of distanciation and appropriation'. It functions only if readers distance themselves from their world, to enter the world of the text and make it their own. Through distanciation and appropriation, the reader of a text becomes a disciple of the text. This hermeneutical understanding of appropriation is also relevant for doing intercultural theology: we need to leave our comfort zone and step over cross-cultural borders, in order to meet and understand 'the other'. In this way, we make ourselves vulnerable, and strive for hermeneutical openness, while being aware of possible power disbalances (economic; cultural; gender).[15] It is clear that this process of appropriation in intercultural theology can be successful only when the various conversation partners are willing to leave their comfort zone.

Secondly, the concept of 'appropriation' can also be related to Kevin Vanhoozer's idea of the 'drama of doctrine'[16]: Reformed theology as formulated in the Reformed confessions is a normative 'script', while the dramatic 'performances' of the 'script' are the 'appropriations' of Reformed theology in different contexts. Important is the conscious or unconscious agency of pastors and ordinary believers: appropriation is not an anonymous process of inculturation, but it is rooted in the individual and communal Christian life in a particular context. In this way, the gospel of Christ is dramatized to the watching world.[17]

Thirdly, the German missiologist Sundermeier used the idea of a 'hermeneutic of difference' ('*Differenzhermeneutik*'), which he developed as a guide for interreligious and intercultural encounters, and his ideas are useful for understanding the intercultural process of appropriation. Sundermeier aims at acknowledging, affirming and understanding the stranger in their strangeness, in a 'dialectical model of strangeness' ('*dialektisches Fremdheitsmodell*').[18] He discerns several stages in an intercultural conversation:[19]

a. Sundermeier proposes starting with a 'distant observation'. Instead of 'reducing what is strange and other to what is identical and familiar', we must first see, observe and analyse the opinions and ideas of the other at a phenomenological level, as neutrally as possible.

b. Participants in an intercultural conversation should engage in 'participatory observation': to understand the stranger in their sociocultural context. This is a 'balancing act' ('*Spagat*') between 'on the one hand letting the stranger stand in his or her otherness, and on the other hand coming close enough to the stranger that a relationship is possible, which is neither possessive nor dismissive and can combine distance with nearness.'[20] Sundermeier sees this as a process of

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[14] Boyd Blundell, *Paul Ricoeur between Theology and Philosophy: Detour and Return* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2010), 135f; Scott Davidson, 'Ricoeur's Later Thought from Hermeneutics to Translation and Back Again', *Philosophy Today*, Spring 2013, 63f; Ming Xie, *Conditions of Comparison: Reflections on Comparative Intercultural Inquiry* (New York; London: Continuum, 2011), 64f.

[15] Marianne Moyaert, 'On Vulnerability: Probing the Ethical Dimensions of Comparative Theology', *Religions* 3, no. 4 (2012): 1157.

[16] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*.

[17] Paas and Schaeffer, 'Reconstructing Reformed Identity', 404.

[18] Theo Sundermeier, *Mission - Geschenk der Freiheit: Bausteine für eine Theologie der Mission* (Frankfurt am Main: Otto Lembeck, 2005), 83.

[19] Sundermeier, *Den Fremden verstehen*, 153f; Theo Sundermeier, 'Aspects of Interreligious Hermeneutics', in *Towards an Intercultural Theology: Essays in Honour of Jan A.B. Jongeneel*, eds Martha Frederiks, Meindert Dijkstra, and Anton Houtepen, IIMO Research Publication 61 (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003), 72f; Martha Frederiks, 'Hermeneutics from an Inter-Religious Perspective?', *Exchange* 34, no. 2 (2005): 102–10; David W. Congdon, 'Emancipatory Intercultural Hermeneutics: Interpreting Theo Sundermeier's Differenzhermeneutik', *Mission Studies* 33, no. 2 (2016): 134f.

[20] Sundermeier, *Mission - Geschenk der Freiheit*, 83. (Transl. as cited in: Congdon, 'Emancipatory Intercultural Hermeneutics', 134.

'contextualization', in which the researcher tries to understand the other with sympathy in her otherness.[21]
c. The third step is 'partial identification', in which a comparative interpretation is made empathically. Trying to understand the other is key, even though the researcher may remain astonished at the strangeness of the other.
d. Finally, the aim of a conversation is what Sundermeier calls '*convivencia*': living together while being different, not in a superficial way, but with the intention to mutually listen to each other and learn from each other.[22] An important tool for facilitating such a '*convivencia*' is translating what is understood from the other in vocabulary and terms of the receptor. This implies a certain level of commensurability, even though it is clear that not everything can be translated into concepts that would be universally comprehensible.[23]

2.2. Introducing the BBBE Model

The next step is to operationalise the concept of 'appropriation' so that it can be applied in empirical research. Towards this goal, I developed a research model which operationalizes the concept of appropriation by discerning four aspects: Believing, Belonging, Behaving and Experiencing (to which I refer as the BBBE model). I use this model as a pragmatic and heuristic tool for systematising, analysing and comparing the empirical data from different contexts while remaining open for variations in the use and understanding of each of the aspects in the various contexts. In this way, the empirical grounding of the research remains transparent.[24]
Concepts for describing and analysing (aspects of) religion are used by anthropologists of religion from the 19th century on.[25] I take my starting point in the model of the religious psychologist Saroglou, who researches religion from 'a cross-cultural psychological perspective' and attempts to identify 'universals and specifics of religions across cultural contexts'.[26] He identifies 'beliefs, rituals, emotions, moral rules, and community/group' as basic components of religion. The psychological dimensions that correspond to these components are: 'believing' / 'intellectual', 'bonding' / 'experiential', 'behaving' / 'moral' and 'belonging' / 'social'.[27]
Other disciplines that study religion use comparable concepts. In the field of sociology of religion, Grace Davie famously researched the relationship between believing and belonging.[28] The aspects of 'belief', 'belonging' and 'behaviour' are also used in sociological research of ritual.[29] In the field of theology, the Anabaptist church planter and theologian Stuart Murray, in his book 'Post-Christendom', uses the dimensions 'believing, belonging and behaving'.[30] In his analysis of

[21] Congdon, 'Emancipatory Intercultural Hermeneutics', 136.
[22] Sundermeier, 'Aspects of Interreligious Hermeneutics', 74.
[23] See for further elaboration of this topic § 2.4.1.
[24] See, for example, the way in which religious psychologists research the relation between religion and mental health in: Peter C. Hill and Kenneth II. Pargament, 'Advances in the Conceptualization and Measurement of Religion and Spirituality: Implications for Physical and Mental Health Research', *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* S, no. 1 (2008): 3–17.
[25] See Douglas A. Marshall, 'Behavior, Belonging, and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice', *Sociological Theory* 20, no. 3 (2002): 360–80.
[26] Vassilis Saroglou, 'Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging: The Big Four Religious Dimensions and Cultural Variation', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 42, no. 8 (1 November 2011): 1322.
[27] Ibid., 1322.1325; Vassilis Saroglou, ed., *Religion, Personality, and Social Behavior* (Routledge, 2013), 5.
[28] Grace Davie, 'Believing without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain?', *Social Compass* 37, no. 4 (1 December 1990): 455–69; Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford; Cambridge, Mass: John Wiley & Sons, 1994).
[29] Marshall, 'Behavior, Belonging, and Belief'.
[30] Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Pub, 2005), ch. 1.: 'Church After Christendom: Belonging/Believing/Behaving'. See also: Joep de Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband. Godsdienstige ontwikkelingen in Nederland* (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2014), 73f; 132.

conversion in the Early Church, the Anabaptist church historian Alan Kreider pays attention to the dimensions 'belief', 'belonging' and 'behaviour' and also mentions the importance of religious experience in Christian conversion and formation in the Early Church.[31]
In the last decades, special attention has been claimed for the aspect of 'experience' in religious psychology.[32] Scientists, such as Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1997), use the concepts 'behaviour', 'belief' and 'experience' in their research of religious psychology.[33] Other sociologists such as Chris Schilderman, pay special attention to the dimensions of 'behaviour' and 'experience'.[34]
In this research, I wish to focus on the appropriation of infant baptism by Reformed believers in different contexts, and I ask what can be learned from a conversation between different appropriations for doing intercultural Reformed theology. For this goal, I use the concepts of 'believing', 'belonging', 'behaving' and 'experiencing' in my research (BBBE). In each research population — CCAP Nkhoma (Central Malawi), RPCI (North India) and the RCN (the Netherlands) — the four aspects relate to each other in different and complex ways and none of the aspects is seen as 'central', compared to the others.

2.2.1. Aspects of Appropriation: Believing — Belonging — Behaving — Experiencing

In this section, I would like to define and describe the operationalization of the four dimensions of appropriation, the BBBE model (believing-belonging-behaving-experiencing), and indicate the limitations and possible pitfalls in its application.

2.2.1.1. Believing

The meaning of 'believing' as an aspect of religion is much debated among anthropologists of religion. One of the challenges in intercultural research is that 'believing' can mean different things to different people in different contexts.[35] Joel Robbins states that there is a consensus among anthropologists about the need to distinguish between 'to believe that' and 'to believe in'. 'To believe that' refers to the rational affirmation of propositional truths, whereas 'to believe in' refers to a relationship and an act of believing. Speaking about Papua, Robbins describes that Christian faith for the local people is: 'trusting God and acting accordingly'.[36] 'To believe in' is, according to Robbins, cross-culturally translatable, as this is not a formal 'assent' to an abstract theological statement but believing in a person or an idea and a commitment to this.
In this research, I use 'believing' in the sense of 'believing in', although in a slightly more comprehensive sense: as 'knowing, affirming and trusting', which is often used in Western Reformed

[31] Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* (Cambridge, England: Grove Books Ltd, 1995); Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999). In a different context, Alister McGrath also uses these four basic 'strata of religion': Alister E. McGrath, *The Territories of Human Reason: Science and Theology in an Age of Multiple Rationalities* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2019), 71f.
[32] Peter C. Hill et al., 'Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality: Points of Commonality, Points of Departure', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 30, no. 1 (1 March 2000): 51–77.
[33] Michael Argyle and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour, Belief and Experience* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997).
[34] Chris A.M. Hermans and Carl Sterkens, 'Comparison in Religion: A Methodological Contribution', in *The Concept of Religion*, ed. Hans Schilderman (Brill, 2015), 130–53.
[35] Joel Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2004); Joel Robbins, 'On Knowing Faith: Theology, Everyday Religion, and Anthropological Theory', *Religion and Society* 10, no. 1 (1 September 2019): 14–29.
[36] Joel Robbins, 'Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity', *Current Anthropology* 48, no. 1 (1 February 2007): 14f.

theology.[37] I am aware that 'believing' takes on different forms in the various research contexts and that different types of respondents will express themselves differently: ordinary believers may express what they believe in non-academic terms, but this does not make their beliefs less valuable.

2.2.1.2. Belonging

In this research, I use 'belonging' not only as a formal qualification of membership of a group or community, but as 'attraction, identification, and cohesion' of an individual, related to a group or other individuals.[38] I relate 'belonging' to the social and spiritual relationship of parents and children with the Christian church, signified by infant baptism. Firstly, I discern a social (or horizontal) and a spiritual (or vertical) aspect of this belonging. The social aspect points to the natural relation of parents and children to the nuclear or extended family, the larger community or society, but also the relation to a (local) Christian church, Christianity or a non-Christian religion. Secondly, there is the 'vertical' belonging, the spiritual relationship of the believing parents and their children with the Triune God. The mutual relations between the horizontal and vertical aspects of belonging are considered, too. Belonging to Christ, the church or the relationships with Christian and non-Christian family members functions in different ways in each of the research contexts, and functions differently again when we compare relationships among Reformed Christians, or between Christians and non-Christians, or between Christians from different theological traditions.

2.2.1.3. Behaving

The aspect of 'behaving' focuses on rites, practices, traditions and morality in personal and communal life.[39] Concerning infant baptism, 'behaving' is, first of all, the actual 'performance' of infant baptism in the liturgy, including the use of material elements (water, baptismal font), the liturgical elements (such as baptismal forms, prayers, songs, the promise by the parents), the moment and mode of baptism.

Secondly, on the occasion of infant baptism parents, family members and the congregation take responsibility for the introduction of the infant into a life with Christ, in the context of the Christian congregation. With the aspect of 'behaving', I look at the impact of infant baptism on the life of parents and baptized children in different contexts.

Because I am not conducting participant observation, 'behaving' is thematised in the interviews by asking questions such as: 'how was the baptismal service and baptism performed', 'who are the agents in infant baptism and what is involved in their agency', and 'how does infant baptism affect the Christian life'? I pay special attention to the question of God's agency and presence in infant baptism because in the classical Reformed confessions and tradition, baptism is a 'sacrament', a 'means of grace', in and through which God is acting in a performative way.[40]

2.2.1.4. Experiencing

In this research, I understand 'experiencing' as the dimension of human existence that functions below, or beyond, the level of representation. In experiences, people's deeper perceptions of themselves, their relationship to God and Christian believers or non-Christians around them surface. Believers can believe in God's presence as a rational truth or a logical deduction, but they can also

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[37] For example, see G. van den Brink and C. van der Kooi, *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2017), 670f. See also: HC QA 21, which defines 'faith' as 'sure knowledge and firm confidence'.

[38] Marshall, 'Behavior, Belonging, and Belief', 360.

[39] Saroglou, 'Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging', 1326.

[40] F. Gerrit Immink, *Het heilige gebeurt: praktijk, theologie en traditie van de protestantse kerkdienst* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2011), 170f; Hans Burger, 'Delen in Christus door de doop', *Kontekstueel* 27, no. 5 (2013).

experience God in personal encounters, miracles or in their emotions or inner self.[41] I cannot research the religious experience itself, but I listen to the testimonies of the respondents and observe their behaviour during the interviews or worship services, which can visibly or tangibly show the emotions or the importance of experiences.[42]

Taking 'experiencing' into consideration in this research is important for several reasons. Firstly, there is much more to the Christian faith than rational beliefs or understanding, community, traditional or ethical behaviour, rituals or church practices. The Christian faith is also about habits of the heart, spirituality and religious feelings, as it touches upon experiences such as love, trust, fear, comfort and other feelings.[43] Secondly, infant baptism can cause personal affection or emotions (love, joy, or even grief) in the parents or congregation members. Adult believers are reminded of their own baptism, and earlier baptisms of their children, which can cause various emotions and also result in a renewal of the commitment to the Christian identity.[44] Thirdly, experiences are important at a theoretical level, as the Christian faith has a holistic character. As Swinton and Mowat state: 'Human experience is "a place" where the gospel is grounded, embodied, interpreted and lived out.'[45] Finally, the theological meaning of religious experience and the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believers plays an important role in the Reformed tradition, as well as in the theology of infant baptism as found in the Reformed confessions and baptismal forms.[46] Ignoring the realm of experiences would imply that an essential part of our human existence, as well as important values of the Reformed tradition, would be left out of the research.[47]

Of course, the differences in worldview between contexts will be of importance in relation to experiences. For example, the 'porous self' (Taylor) of many African and Asian believers is different from the 'buffered self'[48] of many Reformed believers in the West, but this does not make an intercultural understanding of experiences impossible.[49]

Finally, I agree with Anderson's warning: 'There is a profound difference between what I write in this book and the experiences related by the people who tell their stories of the African spirit world. I am

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[41] See Saroglou, 'Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging', 1326.

[42] Webb Keane, 'The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion', *JRAI Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (2008): 114.

[43] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 24f. See for a broader discussion of the relation between doctrine, practices and affections: Simeon Zahl, 'On the Affective Salience of Doctrines', *Modern Theology* 31, no. 3 (July 2015): 428–44, doi:10.1111/moth.12166. In the Reformed tradition this has been famously thematised by Jonathan Edwards. See Kyle Strobel, 'Jonathan Edwards' a Treatise Concerning Religious Affections', in *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 295–311; Gerald R. McDermott, 'Religious Affections', in *A Reader's Guide to the Major Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Nathan A Finn and Jeremy M Kimble (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 95–110.

[44] Chang-Sun Hwang, 'Religious Experience and the Necessity of Mission', *Mission Studies* 20, no. 1 (1 January 2003): 57–76.

[45] John Swinton and Harriet Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 6f.

[46] Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin*, Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte ; Bd. 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957); Alec Ryrie, 'The Nature of Spiritual Experience', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, ed. Ulinka Rublack (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 47–63; Susan C. Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling: Shaping the Religious Emotions in Early Modern Germany* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), ch. 3.

[47] Ilja Maso, 'Het hermeneutische interview', in *Kwalitatief interviewen: kunst én kunde*, ed. J. C. Evers, 2e druk (Amsterdam: Boom Lemma uitgevers, 2015), 189.

[48] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 36f; Stefan Paas, '"Notoriously Religious" or Secularising? Revival and Secularisation in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Exchange* 48, no. 1 (2019): 26–50.

[49] See Van den Toren, *Apologetics*, 43; Benno van den Toren, 'The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit in a Christian Theology of Religions', *Missiology: An International Review* 40, no. 3 (July 2012): 263–80.

always disadvantaged by who I am and how I think. I can never reproduce these stories objectively or completely accurately. (…) A theology that takes a context seriously also has to take the human experiences in that context seriously, no matter how "different" they may be to the researcher's own experience'.[50]

2.2.2. Operationalizing the BBBE Model by Using Sensitizing Concepts

The next step is to prepare for the collection of relevant data for the BBBE model. For this purpose, I use sensitizing concepts. These concepts are first formulated based on desk research and then explored during the field research. The idea of 'sensitizing concepts' was introduced by Herbert Blumer in 1954.[51] He contrasted 'sensitizing' concepts with 'definitive' concepts: 'Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look.'[52] According to Puddephat, sensitizing concepts give 'some direction and purpose, and a general idea of what was to be investigated, but a need to maintain an openness and flexibility to change the concept as the empirical reality of the case is required.'[53]

In this intercultural research, sensitizing concepts are not intended to frame contexts in a Western or neo-colonial way, but they are seen as 'problematic': I look for their characteristics as lived and understood in each context, not as fixed categories: ideas and sensitizing concepts must be 'put to the test'.[54] I also presume that different or conflicting aspects and connotations of the sensitizing concepts can emerge in each context.[55] Because of the explorative character of this research, I was prepared for the fact that, in addition to the concepts which I identified from a Western Reformed perspective, new sensitizing concepts might surface and that some of my concepts might not be relevant in (all of) the research contexts. In this sense, the research also had the character of an 'emergent design', as I wanted to be open to the unexpected in the research contexts.[56] In this way, the research is both theory-driven and data-geared.[57]

In this research, the sensitizing concepts guided the interviews and also as theological points of orientation, which resonate in the data analysis.[58] I formulated the sensitizing concepts on the basis of my understanding of the Reformed confessions and the baptismal forms used in my church, the RCN, as well as the formation through my Reformed upbringing and theological training. This was a 'natural' approach in relation to my respondents, who all, in one way or another, share a common

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[50] Allan Heaton Anderson, *Spirit-Filled World: Religious Dis/Continuity in African Pentecostalism* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 12.

[51] Will C. van den Hoonaard, 'Sensitizing Concepts', in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008), 812.

[52] As cited in: Glenn A. Bowen, 'Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concepts', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5 (3) (September 2006): 14.

[53] Antony J. Puddephatt, William Shaffir, and Steven W. Kleinknecht (eds), *Ethnographies Revisited: Constructing Theory in the Field* (Routledge, 2009), 19.

[54] Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA etc: Sage, 2005), 512.

[55] Ibid.

[56] David L. Morgan, 'Emergent Design', in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008).

[57] Jeanine C. Evers and Anne Loes van Staa, 'Qualitative Analysis in Case Study', in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, eds Albert J. Mills, Elden Wiebe, and Gabrielle Eurepos (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2009), 751. There is discussion about the question whether qualitative research should be strictly inductive and develop concepts and theories from the field research only (grounded theory), or deductive, using concepts and theories from the outset. In this research, I do not intend to formulate a (grounded) theory about infant baptism, because there is already a relatively well formulated idea of what infant baptism in the Reformed tradition means. In each context, a certain understanding of this tradition can be presumed because of the shared framework of the Reformed confessions.

[58] Puddephatt, Shaffir, and Kleinknecht, *Ethnographies Revisited*, 19.

Reformed theological framework of the canonical Scriptures and the Reformed confessions[59]. It is also in line with my research question because I am trying to understand how Reformed theology and practice of infant baptism is appropriated in the formal and the espoused theology of Reformed believers in various contexts.

2.2.3. Some Preliminary Considerations on the Use of the BBBE Model

Using a model always limits the perception of the researcher and unavoidably 'frames' the research data, but without a model, the data remain unrelated and cannot be interpreted and compared. I use this model as a heuristic device to discover, analyse and compare the different appropriations of infant baptism. Some important aspects of caution in the way I use this model are:

1. My research focuses on the appropriation of infant baptism by Reformed believers in different contexts. The model I use originates from a Western context, but because there is a shared adherence to the Reformed theology and tradition, I presume it will help in the collection, description and analysis of the data. During the research, I will move back and forth between the empirical data, the model and the relation to the Reformed framework. The tentative use of this model itself is part of the research and will be evaluated in the final chapter.
2. The socio-religious contexts in which Reformed Christians live are also described and analysed in this research. I am cautious in applying the BBBE aspects across religions. To name an example, 'experiencing' in Christianity and Hinduism cannot be equalled one-to-one, because of the epistemological and religious differences between dualism and monism, which underlie these religions.[60]
3. There may also be important differences between the research contexts concerning the BBBE aspects, and the contexts are not homogenous either: Reformed believers in the late-modern West could have a different rationality than believers from an ATR context, but that is not necessarily the case, and it is not the same for everybody in a given context. Also, if believers are not able to explain what and why they believe, this might be a problem for a Western researcher but not necessarily for believers in a non-Western context.[61]
4. I also ask how the classical Reformed framework is understood and appropriated in each context.[62] The canonical Scriptures and the Reformed confessions are normative anchors in the Reformed tradition. The question of how this is implied in, or attributed to, believing, belonging, behaving and experiencing in different contexts, not only by the leaders of the church but also by the ordinary believers, is part of the research.
5. The distinction between the four aspects is not always watertight. In several cases, the empirical data will resist our neat distinctions, which complies with the explorative character of this research.

2.3. 'Theology in Four Voices'

In line with Saroglou, I contend that the local Christian church and pastors or teachers typically have a 'theological framework' in which infant baptism is performed, its meaning and administration discussed and its interpretation shared as an 'interpretative narrative' with the ordinary believers in

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[59] See § 1.6.

[60] See, for example, the research on mystical experience in: Francis-Vincent Anthony, Chris A. M. Hermans, and Carl Sterkens, 'A Comparative Study of Mystical Experience Among Christian, Muslim, and Hindu Students in Tamil Nadu, India', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 2 (2010): 264–77.

[61] This is related to the question of different understandings of the phenomenon of 'religion' and the role of rationality, religious experience and practice in faith and religion. See, for example: Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2006); McGrath, *The Territories of Human Reason*; Van den Toren, *Apologetics*, ch. 2; Vanhoozer, 'One Rule'.

[62] See, for example: Jos de Kock, Ronelle Sonnenberg, and Erik Renkema, 'Normativity in Empirical Youth Ministry Research', *Journal of Youth and Theology* 17, no. 2 (12 December 2018): 81–103, https://brill.com/abstract/journals/jyt/17/2/article-p81_81.xml.

sermons, catechism classes, personal conversations and written texts.[63] However, I am not only interested in the official positions of the pastors, teachers and confessions, but also wish to understand how ordinary believers appropriate infant baptism. In this way, I hope to reach a rich description of the appropriation of infant baptism in different contexts.
To collect the data for such a rich description in each context, I use and adapt the model of 'Theology in four Voices', developed by Helen Cameron and others. The model was developed as part of their 'Theological Action Research', which they characterize as a form of learning that 'claims not only to effect a change of practice through theology but also to effect change through practice'.[64] The aim of my research is not to be actively involved in the appropriation of infant baptism or to intervene in any practice. I use the model of the 'four voices of theology' as a heuristic device to describe and analyse the conversation of different theological authorities,[65] concretely to map different ways in which Reformed believers in various contexts related to the Reformed theology and practice of infant baptism.[66]
Cameron and others discern normative, formal, espoused and operant theological voices. I will describe the meaning of these theological 'voices', and explain how I adapt, define and use these voices in my research. I will also discuss some of the limitations and possible pitfalls of this model.

2.3.1. Normative Voice of Theology

According to Cameron et al., 'the normative voice of theology is concerned with what the practising group names as its theological authority — an authority which may even stand to correct, as well as inform, operant and espoused theologies.'[67] I add to this description that normative theology can also help to correct formal theologies, for example, of pastors or theology teachers, as well as of the baptismal forms.[68] In the Reformed or Presbyterian tradition, the sources for the normative voice are the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, the ecumenical creeds and the Reformed confessions.[69] For each of the research contexts, the 'normative' voice is, to a great degree, the same: the authority of Scripture and the historic Reformed confessions form the shared normative framework for speaking about infant baptism. Even though there are discussions on certain points or aspects of the historical confessions, they are part of the DNA of the Reformed family.[70] At the same

[63] Saroglou, 'Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging', 1327. In another article, Saroglou writes: 'Personal religiosity consists of beliefs and practices that refer to a transcendent being and are legitimized, to some extent, by an established tradition or group.' Vassilis Saroglou, 'Religiousness as a Cultural Adaptation of Basic Traits: A Five-Factor Model Perspective', *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14, no. 1 (1 February 2010): 109. See also Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom*, 26–27.
[64] Cameron, Bhatti, and Duce, *Talking about God*, 58f.
[65] Cameron, Bhatti, and Duce, *Talking about God*; Helen Cameron, '"Life in All Its Fullness" Engagement and Critique: Good News for Society', *Practical Theology* 5, no. 1 (2012): 11–26; Claire Watkins and Helen Cameron, 'Epiphanic Sacramentality: An Example of Practical Ecclesiology Revisioning Theological Understanding', in *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Christian B. Scharen (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 71–89.
[66] See for a comparable use of this model: Jasper Bosman, *Celebrating the Lord's Supper in the Netherlands. A Study of Liturgical Ritual Practices in Dutch Reformed Churches* (Amsterdam-Groningen: Institute for Ritual and Liturgical Studies & Centre for Religion and Heritage, 2020), 8f.
[67] Cameron, Bhatti, and Duce, *Talking about God*, 54.
[68] See, for example, below § 5.5.
[69] See § 1.6. There still remains a difference between the normative authority of the Scriptures ('*norma normans*') as the Word of God and the authority of the confessions ('*norma normata*'): Van den Brink and Van der Kooi, *Christian Dogmatics*, 396; 550f.
[70] M.E. Brinkman, 'De toekomst van de gereformeerde theologie', *Theologia Reformata* 41, no. 3 (1998): 142.

time, new Reformed confessions and catechisms are developed in new and ever-changing context reflecting the '*semper reformanda*' principle.[71]

2.3.2. Formal Voice of Theology

The understanding and interpretations of the normative voice are never static or monolithic, but are depending on the ever changing contexts. In the Reformed tradition, this is reflected in the saying 'E*cclesia reformata quia semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*'. Synods, pastors and ordinary believers refer to the Bible and the Reformed confessions as normative, but their appropriations vary across contexts and throughout time.

The theological reflection by trained theologians is called the 'formal voice' or 'formal theology'. It is defined by Cameron as the 'theology of the academic theologians', or 'the voice of the academy', which has a critical function.[72] The way in which the formal voice is used in this research is broader than the way in which Cameron and others use it, because I include not only the contemporary or synchronic aspect in my research, but I also want to pay attention to the historical and diachronic dimension. Therefore I include different formal theological voices. In this way it is possible to situate the contemporary theological voice in the broader tapestry of the Reformed tradition and Reformed worldwide family.[73]

First, the theology of trained theologians (pastors and teachers). They teach and preach with a certain authority, but at the same time it is clear that in the history of the Reformed tradition there were different appropriations of infant baptism and also today differences among Reformed theologians can also be easily observed.

The second layer of formal theology is traced in the Reformed liturgical forms. In the continental Reformed tradition, these forms are officially endorsed by ecclesiastical gatherings or synods and, in that sense, function as normative theology. However, there are many regional differences between these forms; the forms are adapted and new forms are introduced; Reformed pastors also adapt these forms in the worship service, so that they function as formal voices.

Thirdly, the voice from Calvin's work in Geneva may sound normative in some contexts, but I treat it as a formal theological voice, a fresh Reformational appropriation of the theology and practice of infant baptism in and for the newborn Genevan Reformed church. Calvin intended to do this according to the normative sources of the Christian faith: the canonical Scriptures and the ecumenical creeds.[74]

The formal voices will be mapped through literature study (baptismal forms; catechetical materials), as well as interviews with theology teachers and pastors.

2.3.3. Espoused Voice of Theology

Espoused theology is the 'theology embedded in a group's articulation of its beliefs ('what we say we do')'.[75] It is the reflection and faith awareness of a group of believers or a congregation, as

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[71] See for a reflection and some examples: B. Plaisier, 'De belijdenis in de jonge kerken', *Theologia Reformata* XXV (1982): 171–88 and 261–77; Mohan Chacko, *I Want to Know God. An Asian Catechism* (Dehradun, India: Truth and Grace, 2013); Theo Pleizier, Arnold Huijgen, and Dolf te Velde, *Gewone Catechismus: Christelijk geloof in 100 vragen en antwoorden* (Utrecht: Kok Boekencentrum, 2019).

[72] Cameron, '"Life in All Its Fullness" Engagement and Critique: Good News for Society', 13. Elsewhere the formal voice is described as offering a 'specifically 'intellectual' articulation of faith seeking understanding, through practising a form of thought which engages in critical and historically and philosophically informed enquiry, regarding the ways in which faith is, and has been, expressed. (…) has a positive role to play in constructively offering developed modes of thought that can enable reflection on practice, and the articulation of an espoused theology.' Cameron, Bhatti, and Duce, *Talking about God*, 55.

[73] See for a broader explanation of this approach above § 1.5.

[74] Note that, in the Reformed churches, pastors and teachers subscribe to the Reformed confessions, but not to Calvin's theology.

[75] Cameron, '"Life in All Its Fullness" Engagement and Critique: Good News for Society', 13.

articulated by the 'practitioners of faith' themselves. The main instrument for mapping the espoused voice was interviewing ordinary believers. In the interviews, I enquired into the actual 'reflective God-talk' of ordinary believers on the practice of infant baptism.[76] I reckoned with the fact that respondents would perhaps not easily find the words to describe what they believe and practice, because they are not used to reflecting on faith questions and church practices.[77] To stimulate reflection, some group interviews were arranged as well.
For doing theology interculturally, listening to the voice of espoused theology is essential. In the Majority World, the normative and formal voices are often heavily indebted to Western theological literature. But as Van den Toren states: 'the study of intercultural theology is only possible if we are learning to look beyond the boundaries of dominant forms of Western academic discourse.'[78] Listening to ordinary believers in various contexts was a good way of practising this.

2.3.4. Operant Voice of Theology

Operant theology is 'the theology embedded within the actual practices of a group (what we do)'.[79] It consists of the 'faith-carrying words and actions of believers', which are often formed and practised in an unconscious or unreflective way.[80] I pay only limited attention to this theological voice because a thorough mapping would require a period of participant observation, which is not feasible in the context of this research.
In each context, I planned to attend at least one baptismal service, to observe how the liturgy of baptism is performed and how different people (pastor, parents, congregation) participate in it. In addition, local informants were asked for materials about the baptismal service. The individual interviews, group interviews and literature will also provide some information about operant theology. I use the information about operant theology as an additional source, but not with the same weight as the other theological voices.

[76] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*; Astley and Francis, *Exploring Ordinary Theology Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*.
[77] John Williams, 'Congregational Studies as Resource and Critique for a Mission-Shaped Church', *ANVIL* 26, no. 3 & 4 (2009): 243–53; Martyn Percy, *Shaping the Church. The Promise of Implicit Theology* (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Pub., 2010); See also: Ann Christie, *Ordinary Christology: Who Do You Say I Am? Answers From The Pews* (Farnham; Burlington, UK: Ashgate, 2012).
[78] Van den Toren, 'Three-Way Conversation', 8.
[79] Cameron, '"Life in All Its Fullness" Engagement and Critique: Good News for Society', 13.
[80] Cameron, Bhatti, and Duce, *Talking about God*, 54f.

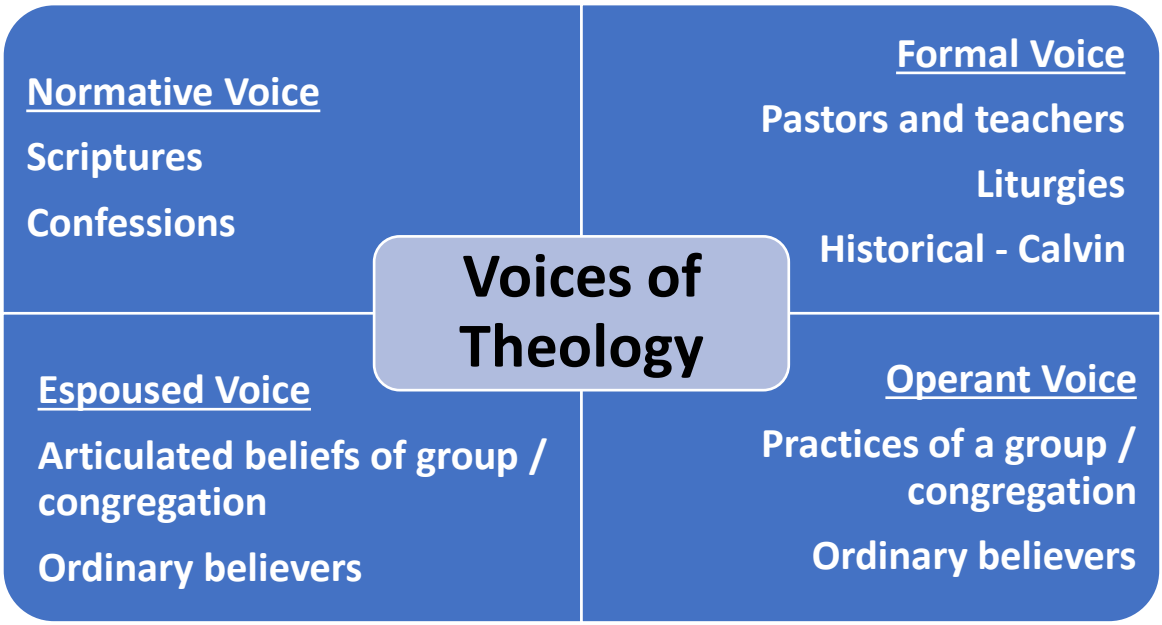

Figure 1 Model of the Four Voices

2.3.5. Pitfalls and Limitations of the Four Voices Model

The power of a model is that it puts things in order. The risk is also evident: imposing a grid upon data which causes them to ventriloquise the opinion of the researcher.[81] In using this model, it is clear that the researcher is orchestrating the four voices. This is unavoidable and every researcher has to deal with the reality that 'where you stand is what you see'. Recognizing that neutral observation is impossible, I try to work as transparently as possible, by making my theological and conceptual framework explicit and showing how I make the data speak.

1. In various contexts, the relations and power distance between pastors and ordinary believers are different. This influences the place and function of formal and espoused theology and affects the way in which respondents are involved in the research. In the research at hand, I respected the existing situation and worked with the aid of local gatekeepers, who also selected the respondents. I interviewed the respondents separately and it was agreed that during the interviews the pastors would not be present, while I also promised anonymity with respect to the content of the interviews.

2. In this research, the formal theological voice is (at least partly) mapped by listening to trained theologians and the espoused theological voice by interviewing ordinary believers. This is not to suggest that there is a simple equation of pastors and theologians with formal theology and ordinary believers with espoused or operant theology. Trained theologians do not only reflect on the other theological voices but also have their own normative, espoused and operant theology. In interviews, pastors and teachers will not just react as a representative of formal theology, but also use the lens of their own espoused and operant theology. Ordinary believers can have a high level of education and a good knowledge of normative and formal theology, which makes some of them respond not only as representatives of espoused and operant theology but also makes them reflect on formal and normative theology. This lack of clear demarcation lines between the four voices is recognized by the designers of the model and will be considered in the analysis and comparison.[82]

[81] Knut Tveitereid, 'Making Data Speak. The Shortage of Theory for the Analysis of Qualitative Data in Practical Theology', in *What Really Matters: Scandinavian Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, eds Jonas Ideström and Tone Stangeland Kaufman (Eugene, Oregon : Pickwick Publications, 2018), 42.

[82] Cameron et al. state: 'these four voices are not discrete, separate from one another; each voice is never simple', Cameron, Bhatti, and Duce, *Talking about God*, 54.

3. The Four Voices model was developed in the context of Theological Action Research (TAR), first of all in the Anglican church in Great Britain. I realise that the range of the four voices in the Anglican and Reformed context can be different (for example, liturgical forms change over time in Reformed and Presbyterian churches and I, therefore, treat baptismal forms as a formal voice of theology, instead of a normative voice, which might be appropriate in an Anglican context).

4. The Four Voices model makes us look at the data in a specific Western and analytical way. Cameron and others write: 'researchers employing Theological Action Research consider all the materials — written and unwritten, textual and practical — as (potentially) "theology", as "faith seeking understanding."'[83] However, in various contexts, this perception of doing theology can be different and the possible consequences of this must be kept in mind in the analysis of the data.

2.4. Intercultural Conversation on Infant Baptism

The current research project also wishes to contribute to the development of research methodology for doing intercultural theology. This is put into practice not only by developing a heuristic model for describing and analysing theological themes or practices[84] but also by staging an intercultural conversation between the different theological voices on infant baptism, which are discerned with the help of the Four Voices Model:[85]

- the voices of pastors, teachers, elders and deacons (representing formal theological voices), as well as the voices of ordinary believers (representing espoused theological voices) from the contexts of the North Indian RPCI, the Central Malawian CCAP Nkhoma and the Dutch RCN;
- baptismal forms as used by the various churches in the research contexts (representing ecclesiastical formal theological voices);
- Reformed confessions and the canonical Scriptures (representing normative theological voices);
- John Calvin's voice from sixteenth-century Geneva, as an example of a re-formation and fresh historical appropriation of the theology and practice of infant baptism as it was present in the Roman Catholic church of his time (representing a historical formal theological voice);

In this section, I describe how I understand and use the concept of an intercultural conversation in this research project.

2.4.1. From Comparison to Conversation

It is my contention that, notwithstanding the communicative obstacles posed by the diversity of contexts, an intercultural conversation is possible and can be mutually enriching.[86] Firstly, this research presupposes a certain level of commensurability. From a philosophical stance, we can argue that if worldviews or cultures would be fully incommensurable, we would not be able to know what is incommensurable.[87]

Secondly, anthropologists have been able to do intercultural research since the 19th century and have reflected on the possibility and impossibility of intercultural comparisons, recognizing incommensurability on some points, while there is also commensurability.[88]

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[83] Ibid., 51.

[84] See above § 2.2.

[85] See above § 2.3 for an explanation of how the model of the Four of Theology is appropriated in this research. For for the expression 'intercultural conversation' see, for example: Van den Toren, 'Three-Way Conversation', 125.

[86] Paul G. Hiebert, *The Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999).

[87] Van den Toren, *Apologetics*, 171.

[88] Van der Veer, *The Value of Comparison*; Andre Gingrich, 'Comparative Method in Anthropology', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James D. Wright, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Elsevier,

Thirdly, from a theological perspective, I contend that God as a 'communicative agent' is not bound by our contexts. In the Apostles' Creed, there is the confession of one God, Creator of heaven and earth. This implies a unified basis of reality, as well as the conviction that all humans are created in the 'image of God', which provides basic confidence in the possibility of meaningful communication across contextual boundaries.[89]

Finally, believing that God is reconciling everything in and through Jesus Christ, also implies a certain level of translatability and commensurability.[90] Incommensurability would imply that certain contexts cannot be reached by the Gospel of Christ, while the universal meaning of Christ's incarnation and cross assures us, that God reveals himself across contexts (Mat. 28: 18–20).[91] This does not take away that an ongoing awareness of, and reflection on, possible flaws in communication is needed.[92]

Among Christian educators, Biblical scholars and missiologists there is an awareness that an intercultural conversation has an intrinsic value for the development of personal faith, for understanding the riches of Scripture and 'doing theology' in a globalizing world.[93] Therefore, I contend that it belongs to the task of intercultural theology not just to compare different contexts, but also to bring these into a conversation. Van den Toren characterizes intercultural theology as 'a theology of the worldwide church as the body of Christ in which different cultural and social expressions of the Christian faith come into a conversation.'[94] How the Gospel is appropriated, cultivated and inhabited in one context hopefully offers insights that are also relevant for other contexts and can reveal new or neglected aspects of the Christian faith and practices.[95] Finally, an intercultural conversation can also have a critical function and make us aware of our 'cultural blinkers', reminding us that the appropriations of Christian teachings and practices are always contextual because the truth of the Gospel is received and appropriated in, and for, changing contexts.[96]

2.4.2. Staging Intercultural Theological Conversations: State of the Art

The 'exchange of Christian theologies' or 'inter-culturation' was proposed by Aylward Shorter, David Bosch and others,[97] and various theologians have already been theologizing in this way. However, firstly, intercultural dialogues are typically set up among trained theologians, but the voices of

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2015), 411–14. See also for a thorough philosophical reflection on intercultural comparison: Xie, *Conditions of Comparison*.

[89] Van den Toren, *Apologetics*, 31f; Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2010).

[90] Eph. 1:4ff; Col. 1:20; Tit. 2:11.

[91] Van den Toren, *Apologetics*, 171; Cortez, 'Creation and Context', 348.

[92] Paul G. Hiebert, 'Critical Contextualization', in *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapid, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1994), 75–92.

[93] Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2007); Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006); Frederiks, 'World Christianity: A Training School for Multiculturalism'; Allen Yeh, *Polycentric Missiology: 21st-Century Mission from Everyone to Everywhere* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016).

[94] Van den Toren, 'Significance of Postcolonial Thinking'.

[95] Van den Toren, 'Three-Way Conversation', 3; See also: Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.; Edinburgh: Orbis Books; T & T Clark, 1996); Cortez, 'Creation and Context', 13; Bom and Van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity*, 165.

[96] Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 12f.

[97] Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 13f; David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 455f.; Bom and Van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity*, 148f.

ordinary believers are usually not included.[98] Secondly, there is a growing number of case studies of contextual theologies, which mostly focus on questions of inculturation of certain aspects of Christian theology in one specific context, but these do not stage intercultural conversations.[99] Thirdly, Walls, Sanneh, and others point out the 'translatability' of the Gospel in various contexts.[100] Melba Padilla Maggay shows how cultural-religious concepts from Asia can not only be used in the contextualization of the Gospel but can also contribute to the development of global Christian theology.[101] Just like Walls and Tennent, Maggay, too, focuses mainly on the opinions of academic theologians and pays little attention to the contributions of ordinary believers (espoused theology). Fourthly, the search for mutual understanding and theological reflection at a grassroots level is explored in intercultural Bible reading projects, such as by Hans de Wit, where first of all ordinary readers from various continents meet.[102] This provides interesting and revealing results, but at the same time, it is not easy to relate the outcome of such projects to more academic theological conversations.[103]

Finally, the research by Van den Toren comes close to what I am doing, for example, when he brings literature on different academic and non-academic African theological voices into conversation with Karl Barth.[104] The research by Bom and Van den Toren among French-speaking students from Africa on the relationship between science and religion is comparable to the intercultural conversation I envision.[105] While his research also pays attention to espoused voices, it restricts itself to French-speaking Africa, while I try to bring more different contexts into conversation with each other.

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[98] See, for example: Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation*, A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2013); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation*, A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World 4 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2016). See also: Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K. K. Yeo (eds), *Majority World Theology: Christian Doctrine in Global Context* (IVP Academic, 2020).

[99] William A. Dyrness and Oscar Garcia-Johnson, *Theology without Borders: An Introduction to Global Conversations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015); Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, 'Rise of Intercultural Biblical Exegesis in Africa', *Hervorm HTS : Theological Studies* 64, no. 3 (2008): 1347–64; Sammy Githuku, *Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics: A Christian Integration of the Old Testament and the Agikuyu Concept of Sin* (Nairobi: Nairobi Academic Press, 2012); Allen Yeh and Tite Tiénou (eds), *Majority World Theologies: Theologizing from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Ends of the Earth* (Littleton: William Carey Library Pub, 2018).

[100] Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, esp. 26f.; Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2009); Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*; Benno van den Toren, 'Het Christendom als vertaalbeweging. Over "vertaling" als een model voor de contextualisering van het christelijk geloof in andere culturen', *Theologia Reformata* 58, no. 1 (2015): 39–56.

[101] Melba Padilla Maggay, *The Gospel in Culture: Contextualization Issues through Asian Eyes* (Manila, Philippines: OMF Literature, 2013). See also: Charles Sarpong Aye-Addo, *Akan Christology: An Analysis of the Christologies of John Samuel Pobee and Kwame Bediako in Conversation with the Theology of Karl Barth* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2013).

[102] Hans de Wit et al., eds, *Through The Eyes Of Another: Intercultural Reading Of The Bible* (Elkhart, Ind: Inst of Mennonite Studies, 2005); Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West (eds), *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008); T.E. Wolverton, 'An Intimate Revelation: Intercultural Bible Reading with Adolescents' (PhD, Amsterdam, Free University, 2014), https://research.vu.nl/ws/files/42123629/complete%20dissertation.pdf.

[103] Kune Biezeveld, 'The Role of "the Other" in the Reading of the Bible: Towards a New Roadmap for Bible Reading in the Western World', in *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning*, eds Hans de Wit and Gerald West (Leiden; Boston: Brill Academic Pub, 2008), 123–39.

[104] Benno van den Toren, 'The Christus Victor Motif in Karl Barth and African Theology: An Essay in Intercultural Theology', *Zeitschrift Für Dialektische Theologie* 33, no. 1 (2017): 178–99.

[105] Bom and Van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity*, 20f.

In addition to the aforementioned academic comparisons and the inductive and democratic approaches in intercultural Bible reading, I first pay attention to normative, formal and espoused theological voices from the present and the past, by including trained theologians and ordinary believers from three contexts. Secondly, I show how the different appropriations of the Reformed rite of infant baptism are embedded in the contexts of the participants and how both trained theologians and ordinary believers respond theologically in, and to, these contexts. Thirdly, I wish to go beyond the mapping of differences and comparisons by asking if, and how, the different appropriations could be mutually enriching and critical and corrective. Fourthly, in staging an intercultural conversation, I do not desire merely a translation of concepts from one context into another, but I wish to learn more about 'doing theology' in new and changing contexts.[106] This is, in the words of Vanhoozer, a process in which 'Word and Spirit [are] leading the church to see in culture new earthen vessels for the gospel'.[107] In the process of appropriation and conversation, the Gospel is expressed afresh in a context-relevant way, which enables a Christ-centred transformation in, and of, the context.[108] Finally, fresh appropriations can transcend their context and contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of the love of Christ outside of their original context (Eph. 3:18–19).

2.4.3. Shared Attention to God

Intercultural theology entails the pursuit of a conversation about God with Christians from various contexts. Christ, as the Head of the worldwide Body of the church, brings believers together as conversation partners.[109] We are all members of the Body of Christ, we recognize each other as partners in the *Missio Dei*. Firstly, in intercultural conversations, it is possible that new perspectives, knowledge and understanding emerge of how God acts in and through this world, the church and its sacraments.[110] Referring to our globalizing world, Vanhoozer writes: 'What is different about doing theology in an era of World Christianity is our awareness of how narrow our way of pursuing "the way" really is.'[111] In our shared attention to God, we wish to grow in the wisdom and knowledge of God in Christ. Walls states that, in the transmission of the faith across cultural lines, it is 'as though Christ himself actually grows'.[112]

Secondly, these conversations are important for appreciating the unity and diversity in the Body of Christ: various local voices listening to each other, can mutually learn from each other and eventually correct each other and point out our cultural blinkers.[113] In this way, contextual theologies can transcend the local, and contribute to the catholicity of the worldwide body of Christ. In line with 1Cor. 9:22, intercultural theology is a way of 'becoming all things to all people'. This may

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[106] David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003), 113; Flett, *Apostolicity*, 270f.

[107] Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 104; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'May We Go Beyond What Is Written After All? The Pattern of Theological Authority and the Problem of Doctrinal Development', in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapid, Mich.; Cambridge UK: Eerdmans Pub Co, 2016), 575f. See also: Bom and Van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity*, 20f.

[108] See for the concept of 'transformation': Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 7f; Bom and Van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity*, 152f.

[109] Van den Toren, 'Three-Way Conversation', 123. The idea of dialogue in the presence of God was called 'trialogue' in Pastoral Theology: E.S. Klein Kranenburg, 'Trialoog: de derde in het pastorale gesprek' (Boekencentrum, 1988).

[110] Bom and Van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity*, 165; Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, xvii; Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 115f; Van den Toren, 'Three-Way Conversation', 137f.

[111] Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 124. See also: Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, ch. 10.

[112] Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, xvii.

[113] Flett, *Apostolicity*, 248.

help to overcome theological insularity or mere ethnic theologies, which are not communicating in, and with, the wider body of Christ.[114]
Thirdly, intercultural theology strives to go beyond the hegemony of Western academic theology, also listening, as members of the one Body of Christ, to 'theology' as it is lived and experienced by ordinary believers, without or with little academic training in theology.[115]
Finally, joint attention to God in Christ can lead to a transformation or conversion of the individual, churches, communities and contexts. This could be an application of how Andrew Walls describes conversion: 'the turning towards Christ of everything that is there already so that Christ comes into places, thoughts, relationships and worldviews in which He has never lived before.'[116] This can, of course, also lead to conflicts, or to being or becoming a stranger to the surrounding context, [117] as it also creates space for critical theological reflection: possible false views of God, opinions that serve the oppression of vulnerable people or betray a wrong attitude to the created reality, the church or public life can become visible.
This research hopefully demonstrates that an intercultural theological conversation is different from a colonial or missionary discourse and that Reformed theology is not the 'possession' of Western Christians.[118] By staging an intercultural conversation, I also desire to create a safe space where the voices of Reformed Christians from various contexts, and with different educational backgrounds, are heard in equal rights.

2.4.4. Shared Attention to the Reformed Tradition

Jos de Kock and Ronella Sonnenberg write: 'A religious practice that is the object of research is always more or less historically and locally rooted in a particular tradition and historically and locally embedded in a culture or cultural tracks.'[119] Apart from the conversation partners in the worldwide Reformed family (synchronic),[120] I also listen to voices from the Reformed tradition in which all respondents and I, in some way, participate: the Reformed confessions, baptismal forms and Calvin's Genevan appropriation (diachronic). This is the 'shared tradition' in the research contexts, of which respondents are well aware.[121]
From a methodological point of view, I treat the Reformed confessions, baptismal forms and Calvin's texts as research data (document analysis), which, as do the interviews, reflect part of our empirical reality and require analysis, understanding and interpretation.[122] I ask, more specifically, in what way the framework of the Reformed tradition can be related to the fresh appropriations of infant baptism by Reformed believers today.
The chapter on Calvin's Geneva is intentionally positioned after the chapters which describe the empirical research. The reason for this is that I am not using him as a lens to scrutinize the formal or espoused theologies in various contexts, but, rather, I read these authoritative voices afresh through the questions raised by the respondents in the research contexts.

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[114] Bom and Van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity*, 163f. See also: Walls, 'Ephesian Moment'; Vanhoozer, 'One Rule'.
[115] Van den Toren, 'Three-Way Conversation', 132f.
[116] Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, xvii; 3ff; Van den Toren, *Apologetics*, 106.
[117] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 40f; Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 108; Joel Robbins, 'Can There Be Conversion Without Cultural Change?', *Mission Studies* 34, no. 1 (1 March 2017): 29–52; Bom and Van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity*, 152f.
[118] Bom and Van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity*, 7f.
[119] Kock, Sonnenberg, and Renkema, 'Normativity in Empirical Youth Ministry Research', 86.
[120] Bauswein and Vischer, *The Reformed Family Worldwide*; Van den Brink and Smits, 'Reformed Stance'.
[121] See § 1.5
[122] Glenn A. Bowen, 'Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method', *Qualitative Research Journal* 9 (2009): 27–40; Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide for Small Scale Social Research Projects*, 5th ed. (Berkshire, England: Open UP, 2014), ch. 14.

2.4.5. Conversation, Catholicity and Normativity

After reflecting on our shared attention to God and the Reformed tradition, a methodological question remains: what would be the criteria for a 'good appropriation'? Are all appropriations equally valuable or correct? When decides if an appropriation is acceptable or not? I discern various layers of normativity in an intercultural Reformed theological conversation.[123]

In the first place, normativity is found in God's acting and speaking.[124] In our research, we listen to the four voices of 'theology', all of which respond in some way to God's revelation in Christ, as found in the canonical Scriptures. Van den Toren contends that, in an intercultural theological conversation, we pay 'joint attention' to God in Christ as a 'third reality'. In this way, our conversation is always a three-way conversation.'[125]

Secondly, the respondents in this research all self-identify as Reformed Christians, who accept the shared framework of the canonical Scriptures, as well as the Reformed confessions, which function as a hermeneutical lens for interpreting the Scriptures.[126]

Thirdly, only a local church and Christian community can decide what is a faithful appropriation of the gospel, in and for their context, and understand how the universal gospel touches the hearts and lives of the believers. However, as mentioned before, to avoid insularity and sectarianism, a local church or community should also take into account the catholicity of the church as the universal Body of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15).[127] For this reason, an intercultural theological conversation as used in this research has also ecumenical relevance and can serve as a 'practice of catholicity', in which church and Christians can mutually learn from each other and correct each other.[128]

Fourthly, I contend with Vanhoozer and others that our Christian identity is not to be found in our context or location but in Christ. Ethnic and contextual diversity are not erased by the Gospel, but all elements of a context must be turned to Christ (2Cor. 10:4-5).[129] Intercultural theological conversations can make us aware of 'unconverted' elements in Christian faith and life.

Fifthly, in doing intercultural theology, there can be mutual enrichment and correction. I would contend that a balanced appropriation is achieved when the Gospel is expressed in a context-relevant way, which enables a Christ-centred transformation in, and of, a specific context.[130]

Finally, the presence of the normative framework of the Scriptures and the Reformed confessions does not mean that normativity is understood and applied in the same way by the researcher and by the respondents. As a result, respondents may react in different ways to the findings and conclusions of this research, to the differences among contexts, to how I stage the intercultural conversation or to how I evaluate and use the outcome of this conversation. I see it as my task to

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[123] In this section I profit from Kock, Sonnenberg, and Renkema, 'Normativity in Empirical Youth Ministry Research'; Flett, *Apostolicity*, 140f.

[124] H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics 1*, ed. John Bolt, transl. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003), para. 9. For the *Sola Scriptura* principle see also: Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 106f.

[125] Van den Toren, 'Three-Way Conversation'. See also: Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'On the Very Idea of a Theological System: An Essay in Aid of Triangulating Scripture, Church and World', in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. A. T. B. McGowan (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006), 160f.

[126] See also for the position of Calvin and the Reformed confessions in the (Dutch) Reformed: Brinkman, 'De toekomst van de gereformeerde theologie', 142; Martien E. Brinkman, 'Confessing the One Faith within the Reformed Tradition', in *Freedom*, eds A. van Egmond and D. van Keulen (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1996), 97–114.

[127] Van den Toren, 'Three-Way Conversation', 142.

[128] See, for example: Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 103.

[129] Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 108.118.

[130] See for the idea of 'transformation': Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 7f; Martien E. Brinkman, 'The Rediscovery of the Meaning of Baptism—Its Contribution to a Public Theology', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 2, no. 3 (1 August 2008): 272; Bom and Van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity*, 152f.

present the data, the analysis and the intercultural conversation in a transparent way, also using feedback from local gatekeepers, while the evaluation remains my responsibility.
I would contend that a balanced appropriation is achieved when the Gospel is received and expressed in a context-relevant way, which enables a Christ-centred transformation of the believers and, if possible, of (their relation to) the church community and context of which they are a part.[131]

2.5. Technical Design

As the research has an exploratory character, the technical design is tentative because it is not clear from the outset if the same research method will work out well in each context. The evaluation of the research methodology and research tools for doing intercultural theology is part of the research project.

2.5.1. Multiple-Site Case Study

For the empirical research in CCAP Nkhoma in Central Malawi, RPCI in North India and the RCN in the Netherlands, I chose to use a multiple-site case study as a research strategy. In general, case studies are used when the goal of the research is to answer 'why' and 'how' questions, to explain and understand a social phenomenon. According to Yin, a case study is a good method when contextual conditions might be pertinent for the object of study or when the phenomenon and the context cannot be separated clearly.[132] This seems to be the case in my research, as I presumed that the appropriation of infant baptism is shaped not just 'by', but 'in' the socio-religious context.
Next, a multiple-site case study is helpful because of the comparative character of the research: a description of a specific phenomenon across different contexts.[133] To be able to compare the contexts I focus on similar groups of respondents (research population) in each context.[134] The comparison helps to 'discover contrasts, similarities, or patterns across the cases.'.[135] Linda Chimiliar states: 'by illuminating the experiences, implications, or effects of a phenomenon in more than one setting, wider understandings about a phenomenon can emerge'.[136]
By analysing various baptismal narratives and bringing them into a virtual 'intercultural theological conversation', I wish to better understand how the appropriation of infant baptism in different contexts shapes its meaning and practice.

2.5.2. Gatekeepers and Research Population

My main question for the field research is how the sacrament of infant baptism is appropriated by Reformed believers in different contexts, which is why I chose a more or less homogenous group of respondents in each context:
- members of a Reformed or Presbyterian church (pastors, teachers, ordinary believers)

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[131] See for the idea of 'transformation': Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 7f; Brinkman, 'The Rediscovery of the Meaning of Baptism—Its Contribution to a Public Theology', 272; Bom and Van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity*, 152f.
[132] Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 5th ed. (SAGE Publications, Inc, 2013), 4–5.
[133] Also referred to as: multiple-case studies or comparative case studies. Some literature: Alice E. Diebel, 'Neutrality in Qualitative Research', in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008); Pam Bishop, 'Multiple-Site Case Study', in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, eds Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Eurepos, and Elden Wiebe (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2009); Linda Chmiliar, 'Multiple-Case Designs', in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, eds Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Eurepos, and Elden Wiebe (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2009); Yin, *Case Study Research*, 46f.
[134] Uwe Flick, Ernst von Kardoff, and Ines Steinke (eds), *A Companion to Qualitative Research* (London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2004), 147.
[135] Shelagh Campbell, 'Comparative Case Study', in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, eds Albert J. Mills, Elden Wiebe, and Gabrielle Eurepos (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2009), 174.
[136] Bishop, 'Multiple-Site Case Study', 587.

- people who have personal experience with infant baptism, the baptism of their children or grandchildren, in particular.[137]
In each context, insider experts/gatekeepers (pastors; theologians) were asked to help with the selection of interviewees and to organize a group interview. These were people I already knew as colleagues and there was mutual trust concerning integrity and professional familiarity with the research topic.[138] The gatekeepers were positive about such a research project but had no interest in a specific outcome of the research. Neither gatekeepers nor respondents were paid for their participation and they did not receive any personal gain from this research project.
In North India and Central Malawi, I preferred respondents who could speak English, because of the fact that it is more complicated and riskier to do interviews through a translator. Speaking English mostly means being literate, therefore I did only a few interviews with illiterate people. On the one hand, this is positive, as it levels the ground between the contexts because in the Netherlands all respondents were literate. On the other hand, I wished to avoid 'epistemic violence' (Gayatri Spivak), i.e., the silencing of a certain group of respondents.[139] However, because many members of the Reformed churches in the RPCI in North India and the CCAP Nkhoma in Central Malawi are literate, a smaller number of illiterate respondents can be seen as representative of the demographic proportions in the researched groups.

2.6. Field Research in RPCI (North India), CCAP Nkhoma (Central Malawi) and the RCN (the Netherlands)

The data collection took place through desk research, semi-structured interviews, group interviews and personal observations in each context. In each context, the research was conveyed in the same way: the same basic questions in semi-structured interviews, with an openness for new aspects of the appropriation of infant baptism and a short questionnaire for the pastors and teachers about the practice of infant baptism.[140]
In the two contexts that were new to the researcher (RPCI, North India and CCAP Nkhoma, Central Malawi), the research was conducted in two steps. First, preparational desk research of the historical, sociocultural, religious and ecclesiastical situation was done. The research locations in North India were visited three times and in Central Malawi twice. The first visits to these contexts were an orientation on the historical, socio-cultural, religious and ecclesiastical situation. During these visits, interviews with different gatekeepers and insider experts (community interpreters), pastors, elders, and theology teachers occurred.[141] During the second visit, interviews with ordinary believers and a group interview took place. In the Netherlands, the research was done in three Reformed congregations (in the eastern, western and central parts of the country), following the same pattern of desk research and interviews.[142]

2.6.1. Interviews

During the field research, in-depth individual interviews were conducted.[143] The BBBE model and the sensitizing concepts operationalising it were used to design the interview questions and to

[137] Of course, it might be interesting to also interview people without children, or whose children are not baptised for some reason, and to hear how they experience infant baptism as 'spectators' / congregation members, but this exceeds the limits of this research.
[138] Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 3rd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 60f.
[139] Dotson, 'Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing'.
[140] See Appendix for the interview questions.
[141] Bogusia Temple, 'Cross-Cultural Research', in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008), 180.
[142] In this research, 'Reformed' is limited to my denomination, the RCN, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated).
[143] See Appendix 2 for the interview questions.

structure the actual interviews. The interviews were semi-structured:[144] the general questions were the same in all contexts, but there was an openness to a broad variety of answers and follow-up questions. In each context, some people directed me towards new and unexpected perspectives or stressed things they felt were really important.
I interviewed the ordinary believers separately, to avoid the spouses influencing each other, or the interview being dominated by one of the spouses. I also anticipated that interviewing ten couples would provide richer information than interviewing twenty random congregation members, as the couples reflected on the same event of baptism from a female and male perspective.
The interviews always started with a broad introductory question about what it means to be a Christian in the context of the respondent. This helped to create an open atmosphere and it encouraged the interviewees to bring up their own perspectives and accents. The questions for the pastors, members of the church council[145] and congregation members were, in general, the same, but office bearers were also asked to reflect on the appropriation of infant baptism in their congregation.
In addition to the individual interviews in the RPCI (North India) and CCAP Nkhoma (Central Malawi), I arranged a group interview of 5–8 persons with some of the people that had already been interviewed. The purpose of this was to receive additional information and clarification of what had been said during the interviews, which helped to interpret the interview data. As the ordinary believers were not always used to speaking about theological topics, the group interviews proved also helpful for further conversation and reflection.
Finally, I tried to avoid using academic or technical words or expressions when asking questions. Words like sacrament, ritual, original sin and covenant were used only in the cases where the respondent would use them and then I tried to confirm that we were talking about the same thing by enquiring into the meaning of these words.

2.6.2. Field Observations

I was able to attend a baptismal service in CCAP Nkhoma, Central Malawi and the RCN, the Netherlands, record the occurrence (photos, videos) and keep field notes.[146] Unfortunately, this did not work out in the North Indian RPCI, because baptismal services are not frequent and it was not possible to coordinate it with one of my visits. Besides, in the RPCI, taking pictures during a worship service is not possible for privacy reasons. However, I was able to speak with the gatekeepers and the parents about the worship services.

2.7. Analysis and Integration

The analysis and integration of the empirical data took place in several steps.
a. The first informal analysis of the data started already in the discussions during the field research with gatekeepers and others involved in the research. In this stage, I also recognized that certain sensitizing concepts were not really resonating with the respondents, while especially in the interviews with the ordinary believers also new concepts emerged.
b. Secondly, I coded the data, using 'descriptive coding'.[147] With the help of ATLAS.ti, I analysed the empirical data and developed a codebook, which I used for each context, with the possibility of adding new codes per context. The codes, the manner of coding and the application of the codes in

[144] Lioness Ayres, 'Semi-Structured Interview', in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008); Evers, *Kwalitatief interviewen*.
[145] The governing body of the local church, which consists of elders, pastor(s) and sometimes deacons. In the Presbyterian tradition, this is called the 'church session'.
[146] Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011).
[147] 'Descriptive coding summarizes in a word or short phrase — most often as a noun — the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data.' Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2012), 88.

the research contexts was discussed with the second promotor. In the process of coding, a first understanding was gained of the differences and similarities between the research contexts, as well as between the different voices of theology.
c. Thirdly, I explored and systematized the data with the help of ATLAS.ti while using the searchlight of the BBBE model and the sensitizing concepts. ATLAS.ti proved to be a helpful tool to trace relations and patterns between the descriptive codes, which were then integrated into the next level of analysis ('axial coding').[148] In this way, I mapped the characteristic aspects of each of the theological voices per context and described how these voices relate to each other.
d. Fourthly, I looked at the mutual relations between the aspects of appropriation (believing, belonging, behaving and experiencing) per context. By using these aspects, I hope to avoid one-sided stress on 'behaving' or 'believing' over and against, for example, 'experiencing' and the danger of looking exclusively at verbal or visible expressions of faith.[149] By relating the four aspects, a higher integrative level emerged, which I characterize as the 'baptismal narrative'.
e. Fifthly, in the analysis, it became clear that there was sometimes overlap between the four aspects of the BBBE model: some sensitizing concepts had elements which could be related to more than one of the four aspects. However, by describing the mutual relationship between the four aspects in a systematic way, I was able to integrate them into a baptismal narrative for each context. In this way, a higher integrative level emerged, which was useful for the comparison of the contexts and the intercultural conversation.
f. Sixthly, the voices from the various contexts were brought into an intercultural conversation, while also bringing in the formal voices from Calvin's Geneva and the baptismal forms, as well as the normative voices from the Reformed confessions and the canonical Scriptures (chapter 7).
g. Finally, I involved local stakeholders and internal experts in each of the contexts by asking them to comment on the description and interpretation of the data through email ('member check'[150]). Apart from this, most chapters were discussed in the research group for intercultural theology at the Protestant University (Groningen) and, finally, I received feedback for the description and analysis of each of the research contexts from an external specialist.

2.8. Research Ethics and Pitfalls

Doing field research requires integrity and transparency. The following should be mentioned in this regard:
a. The goal of the research was explained beforehand to the respondents. It was indicated that there is no obligation to answer all questions and that respondents could stop the interview if they felt uncomfortable.[151] I asked for the permission of the interviewees to record the interview and to use the conversation for my research. In order to create a safe atmosphere for the respondents, anonymity and confidentiality were promised and realized. I asked all respondents to sign a permission slip and informed them about the possibility to withdraw their participation later and I left contact information behind, thus people could eventually file a complaint or withdraw their contribution.

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[148] Saldaña cites Boeije when he writes that the purpose of Axial Coding is 'to determine which [codes] in the research are the dominant ones and which are the less important ones ... [and to] reorganize the data set: synonyms are crossed out, redundant codes are removed and the best representative codes are selected', Ibid., 218.
[149] While I do not use a 'semiotic approach', I do agree with Miranda Klaver that a one-sided attention for beliefs or verbal expressions will truncate the understanding of what motivates believers. See Miranda Klaver, *This Is My Desire. A Semiotic Perspective on Conversion in an Evangelical Seeker Church and a Pentecostal Church in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: VU Amsterdam University, 2011), 92f.
[150] See for the (risks of) using member checks: Margarete Sandelowski, 'Member Check', in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008).
[151] Michelle K. McGinn, 'Researcher-Participant Relationships', in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008), 770.

b. The possibility of biases in the field research because of the postcolonial context was discussed with the gatekeepers of the RPCI, North India and CCAP Nkhoma, Central Malawi and also with some of the respondents. Some respondents indicated that the colonial past was not forgotten, but they also declared that they did not feel this would affect our relationship or the interviews, which was confirmed by the gatekeepers. In line with postcolonial concerns, the intent of the research is to give attention to contextual understandings and interpretation of the Scriptures and to ask attention for diversity among the people of God and to include the often-neglected voices of ordinary believers. The research is also intentionally driven by the conviction that the diversity of natures and contexts will add to the richness of the worldwide church.[152]
c. There is always the danger of framing the identity of the other because of colour, gender, language or level of education. This is true for the researcher as well as for the respondents. I tried to anticipate this by expressing that the research is not about right or wrong answers, but that I was interested in the personal opinion of the participants.
d. In all cases, I tried to be sensitive to the authority relations in each context (pastor and congregation member; husband and wife). During the preparation of the research, I consulted with cultural interpreters.[153] Some of these facilitators also functioned as gatekeepers' who selected the participants. Although I tried to discuss the selection of participants as well as possible (using criteria such as social or economic status, and different opinions), there are limits to what can be achieved and I depended largely on what they managed to organize during the visits.
e. The language of the interviews required much attention. In North India and Malawi, English is not the mother tongue of the respondents, which is why the formulations are not always optimal and sometimes a translator was needed during the interviews. Also, relevant quotations from the Dutch interviews had to be translated into English. Even though in North India and Central Malawi, higher education is in English, at the same time it was also the language of the colonisers.
f. The exploratory character of my research entailed that it was not certain in advance whether it would be possible to find data for all of the four theological voices and all of the four aspects of the BBBE model. As indicated earlier, collecting sufficient data for the operant voice was not possible from the outset, due to the limited character of the field research. In practice, it turned out that there was a wealth of data for all theological voices and all aspects of the BBBE model, thanks to the generous cooperation of many respondents and gatekeepers.
g. Finally, I am aware of the pitfall of homogenised identities,[154] but one of the goals of this research is to understand how the manifold theological voices in the worldwide Reformed family can live together ('*convivencia*'), without giving up their local appropriation. I point to different layers in the cultural-religious contexts as well: 'Hinduism', 'African Traditional Religion' or 'Dutch evangelicalism' are not homogenous identities either, but are living and changing traditions.

2.9. Data Management

The data of the field research were stored according to the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) on the server of the Theological University Kampen.[155] During the research period, only the researcher had access to the audio files and transcripts, while the second supervisor had access to the transcripts of the interviews.

2.10. Overview

The structure of the research project can be depicted in this way:

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[152] Pui-lan Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World:* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2003), 84f.
[153] Temple, 'Cross-Cultural Research', 180.
[154] See for the protest against homogenization, for example: Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003).
[155] EU, 'General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) – Official Legal Text', accessed 21 July 2020, https://gdpr-info.eu/.

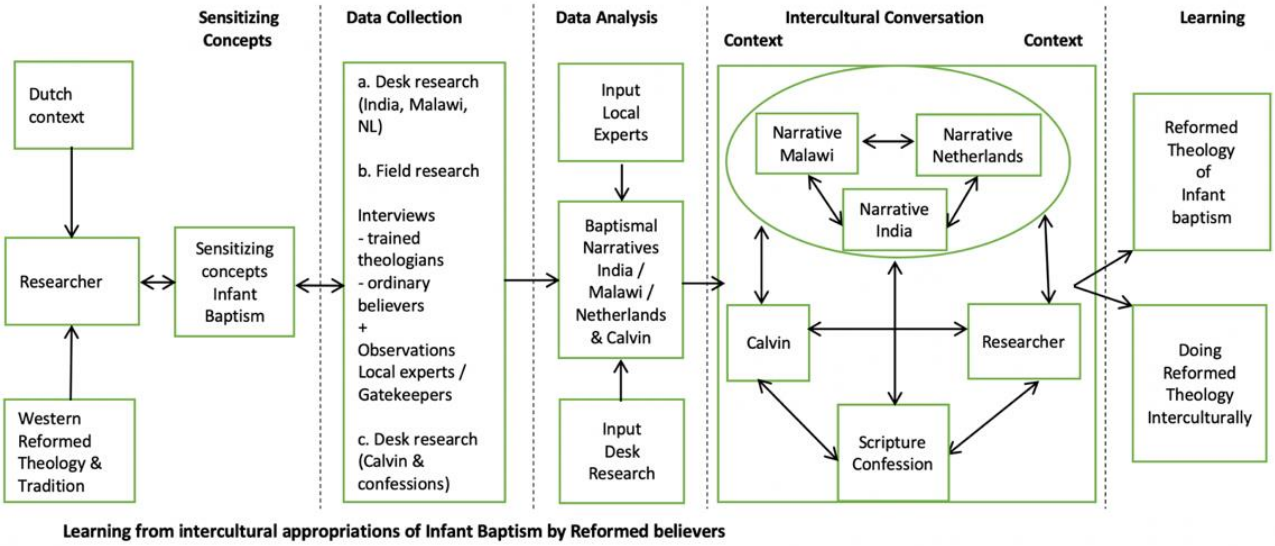

Figure 2 Model of the Research

3. Appropriation of Infant Baptism in the RPCI in North India

In this chapter, I will be answering the first part of the first sub-question by looking into the appropriation of infant baptism of members from three Reformed Presbyterian churches in North India. I first wish to give a short description of the context in which these churches live and practise infant baptism. Next, I will describe and analyse the results of the empirical research and relate the findings to the cultural-religious context.

3.1. Socio-Economic and Cultural-Religious Context

One of the main characteristics of India is diversity: many tribes, different religions, and social and economic divides on a sub-continent with over 1.2 billion inhabitants. India became independent from British Colonial rule in 1947. Contemporary India has been artificially divided into parts, which were never a unity before the Independence, making the social and political differences within the country tremendous. India has twenty-nine states (most of them have their own language) and six union territories, areas that are administered by the central government in New Delhi. In general, Indian society is characterised by religious and cultural diversity and plurality, although there are states with a clear Hindu, Christian or Muslim majority.[1]

According to the last census (2011), the religious picture for the Uttarakhand region in North India, where I conducted my research, is as follows[2]:

	Uttarakhand	National
Hindu	83.98%	79.80%
Muslim	11.91%	14.23%
Christian	0.79%	2.3%
Sikh	2.15%	1.72%
Buddhist	0.69%	0.70%

Table 1 Religions Uttarakhand – North India (2011)

This indicates that there is a huge Hindu majority in the research region, which is also reflected in the interviews, where the respondents hardly mentioned any other non-Christian religion also present in the region (Islam; Buddhism; Sikhism). For this reason, the focus of our description of the religious context will be mainly on Hinduism, while remaining aware that the religious map is much more diverse.

The term 'Hinduism', as referring to a separate religion, was probably coined only in the 18th century by Europeans.[3] Today most scholars agree that Hinduism cannot be understood as a more or less clear cut religion. Hinduism is not a 'religion of a book', but a 'conglomerate of rituals, religious narratives, art, music, institutions, traditions, theologies, artefacts, and activities', which all fit into

[1] CIA.gov, 'India', in *The World Factbook* (Central Intelligence Agency, 3 September 2021), https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/india/. See also: Meera Nanda, *The God Market: How Globalization Is Making India More Hindu* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011).

[2] 'Religion Data – Population of Hindu / Muslim / Sikh / Christian – Census 2011 India', accessed 10 March 2020, http://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php. The Joshua project has the following statistics for Uttarakhand: Hindu 83.87%; Muslim 12.4%; Sikh 2.0; Christian 0.8%: https://joshuaproject.net/states_districts/IN/IN39/IN39005 (last accessed 02.08.2022). It is hard to say how reliable these statistics are, but they give an indication, at the least.

[3] Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?: Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); G. A. Oddie, 'Constructing "Hinduism". The Impact of the Protestant Missionary Movement on Hindu Self-Understanding', in *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500*, ed. Robert Eric Frykenberg (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 155–82.

the social structure of Hinduism.[4] It is often characterized by Hindus as '*Sanatana Dharma*', 'the eternal way of life', which does not have to be explained in words, as long as one lives according to the right rules ('*dharma*').[5] All this makes it hazardous to describe and compare Hindu beliefs in parallel with Christian beliefs, as it might suggest that the Western idea of systematic theology also drives Hinduism, which is not the case for many Hindu believers.[6] Instead, there are many different religious groups and leaders who self-identify as Hindu but represent different religious ideas and practices. My respondents often refer to 'Hinduism' in general, as the 'lived religion' they witness among family members, friends and in the public square. I will use the term in the same loose way, without any intention of essentializing or framing Hindus or Hinduism.

3.2. Current Political-Religious Situation

According to its Constitution, India is a secular country and all religions are protected by law, but the reality is much more complex, as 'secularity' in India does not prohibit religious expressions in the public square, nor does it imply a strict separation of church and state.[7] The Indian philosopher Meera Nanda observes: 'Hinduism has become the de facto religion of the 'secular' Indian state'.[8] In the predominantly Hindu region, where our research was done, Hindu religious practices are dominantly present in the public square: around-the-clock chanting in temples, public religious processions and religious feasts are a constant ingredient of everyday Hindu life, and it is hard for Christians to abstain from these practices without offending Hindus. As a consequence, people from different religions often prefer to live in different parts of the cities.[9]

Particularly in the last decennia of the twentieth century, Hindu nationalism ('new Hinduism') is on the rise under the name '*Hindutva*' (or 'Hinduness'): a true Hindu considers India as his fatherland, as well as his 'sacred land'.[10] The cultural-religious narrative is that the original inhabitants of India shared the Hindu religion as the unifying factor in all their diversity. This also implies that Indian Christians and Muslims are seen as apostates of Hinduism. By supporting the '*Ghar wapsi*' or '*Paravartan*' movement (which means 'coming home' or 'turning back'), nationalist Hindus strive for the 'reconversion' of Muslims and Christians.[11] The nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP — translation: Indian People's Party), to which the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, belongs, propagates a unified Hindu identity, which is to be accepted by all Indians to safeguard the 'unity and integrity of the nation': 'a common nation (*Rashtra*), a common race (*Jati*) and a common civilization (*Sanskriti*)'.[12]

Non-Hindus have the right to follow their own moral rules, for example, concerning adoption and divorce, which results in a plural legal system: there is the Hindu Personal Law and there are

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[4] Knut A. Jacobsen, 'Introduction', in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen et al. (Brill Academic Publishers, 2018). See also: Axel Michaels, *Hinduism: Past and Present* (Princeton, N.J. Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 12–30.

[5] Jessica Frazier, ed., 'Bridges and Barriers to Hindu Christian Relations Research Project' (Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, 2012), 15, https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Bridges%20and%20Barriers%20to%20Hindu%20Christian%20Relations.pdf.

[6] The same is true for many Christians, of course. See Watkins and Cameron, 'Epiphanic Sacramentality: An Example of Practical Ecclesiology Revisioning Theological Understanding', 84–85.

[7] George Gispert-Sauch, 'Hinduism and Christianity', in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen et al. (Brill Academic Publishers, 2018).

[8] Nanda, *The God Market*, 3; See also: Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (New York, NY: Picador, 2006).

[9] F-9:10; teacher; 30+.

[10] Arvind Sharma, 'On Hindu, Hindustān, Hinduism and Hindutva', *Numen* 49, no. 1 (1 January 2002): 21, doi:10.1163/15685270252772759.

[11] Iris Vandevelde, 'Reconversion to Hinduism: A Hindu Nationalist Reaction Against Conversion to Christianity and Islam', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 34, no. 1 (1 April 2011): 31–50.

[12] Gitika Commuri, *Indian Identity Narratives and the Politics of Security* (Delhi; London: SAGE, 2010), 72.

different Personal Laws for non-Hindus.[13] The consequence is that, in the case of Hindus converting to Christianity, they are no longer under Hindu law and lose the rights and privileges of being Hindu, such as the right to inherit property from their Hindu relatives.[14] In the last years, anti-conversion laws were accepted in a number of states in India, which makes a formal conversion from Hinduism to Christianity a lengthy and bureaucratic process.[15] Churches also have to be very careful to follow state regulations when they accept new members.

During these last years, a growing pressure of Hindu nationalism can be observed. People who become Christian are often expelled from their homes, sometimes ill-treated and forced to move to a place where they can live among Christians. *Hindutva* is also a growing problem for Christian schools. All schools have to sing the national anthem at the daily opening ceremony, which is, in fact, a Gandhi-style prayer to the home country ('ultimate happiness lays in the holy land'). For Christian schools, it is hard to refuse, as they do not want to lose their accreditation and the current opportunities for providing a Christian education.[16] The result of all this is that, in North India, Christians are often on the verge of persecution.[17]

This situation affects Christians in our research area, Uttarakhand, where anti-conversion laws have also been accepted. In relation to my research, one teacher indicates that many Christian do not officially convert to Christianity because they are intimidated. As a consequence, they are not baptized, and neither are their children.[18]

3.3. Protestant Christianity in India

Tradition has it that Christianity was already present in India in the first century through the work of the apostle Thomas in South India, whereas Christianity remained almost unknown in North India.[19] Protestant mission started, along with the activities of the East India Company, in the 17th century. In the 18th century, the Company fostered a growing antipathy for Christian missionaries and their educational activities in India, arguing that this would 'endanger the peace and the security of our possessions' and 'the Hindus had as good a system of faith and morals as most people and it would be madness to attempt their conversion'.[20] At first special permissions were needed to settle in India, but in 1813 the British Government changed the Charter of the British East India Company, then allowing Europeans, including missionaries and school teachers, to settle in India. British governmental schools with a Western style and content of education opened. So far, the Protestant mission had attracted mainly people from the lower castes, but by offering quality education, the

[13] Ibid., 70f.

[14] Ciril J. Kuttiyanikkal, *Khrist Bhakta Movement: A Model for an Indian Church? Inculturation in the Area of Community Building* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2014), 298.

[15] Tariq Ahmad, 'State Anti-Conversion Laws in India', October 2018, https://www.diarioconstitucional.cl/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/india-anti-conversion-laws.pdf; James Andrew Huff, 'Religious Freedom in India and Analysis of the Constitutionality of Anti-Conversion Laws', *Rutgers Journal of Law & Religion* 10, no. 2 (2009): 1–36, https://perma.cc/7Z7Y-9U8Q.

[16] D-146:5; fieldnotes

[17] See for a general report also: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 'USCIRF Annual Report 2016 – Tier 2 Countries – India', *Refworld*, 2 May 2016, https://www.refworld.org/docid/57307ce6c.html.

[18] D-192 – gatekeeper I2

[19] See for an overview of the early church history in India: Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). On Roman Catholic mission by St Francis Xavier, Robert De Nobile and others, see, e.g.: Ines G Županov, 'Compromise: India', in *A Companion to the Reformation World*, ed. R. Po-chia Hsia (Malden, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 353–74.

[20] Raj Bahadur Sharma, *Christian Missions in North India, 1813-1913. A Case Study of Meerut Division and Dehra Dun District* (Delhi, India: Mittal Publications, 1988), 24–25.

hope was to also reach the higher castes with the Gospel.[21] Missionaries often looked at the Indians from a Western colonial perspective. Hinduism was seen as decadent and lacking virtues and Hindu society was regarded as inferior, needing education and Christianity to lift up the local people.[22] Under British colonial rule (1858-1947), religious neutrality and equality among religions was proclaimed, but the missionaries had to assure the British government that the Christian mission would not harm British trading interests, which led to the Indians suspecting a 'missionary conspiracy', according to which the ultimate goal of Christian mission would be the reinforcement of colonial rule.[23]

3.4. Presbyterian Reformed Mission to North India in the 19th and 20th Century

The research was done in North India (Uttarakhand) among Reformed Presbyterian Christians. In the 19th century, this region was predominantly Hindu with a rigid caste system. The Hindu caste system defined one's social position, language, profession, marriage, funeral, deities and social duties.[24] The family was the 'basic social unit', a strong and caring community, looking after orphans and elderly people.[25] Most people lived in the villages, the poor suffered from chronic undernourishment and the majority of the population was illiterate.[26]

Protestant and Presbyterian missionaries arrived in North India in the early 19th century. The roots of the churches approached in my research (RPCI) can be traced back to several Presbyterian missions. Firstly, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPC — in India referred to as 'RP'), which started mission work in 1835 in Saharanpur[27] and, secondly, the Presbyterian Church in the USA (in India referred to as 'AP' — American Presbyterian or 'Punjab mission'), which commenced its work in 1833 when John C. Lowrie arrived in Punjab.[28]

In 1857, the 'First War of Independence' (or 'the Great Mutiny') against British colonial rule took place. Not only were several Presbyterian missionaries and their families killed in North India, but Indian Christians were martyred as well.[29] After the war, the number of foreign Presbyterian missionaries grew rapidly, coming not only from America but also from England, Scotland, Ireland and Canada.[30] The foreign missions established their own church structures and often the new

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[21] Susan Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India, Volume 4, Part 3: Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 110.

[22] See Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (eds), *Studying Hinduism: Key Concepts and Methods*, 2nd edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 81.

[23] Vishal Mangalwadi, *Missionary Conspiracy. Letters to a Postmodern Hindu*, 2nd ed. (The MacLaurin Institute, 1996).

[24] Sharma defines caste as 'an exclusive, endogamous, hereditary, corporate group found together by the tradition of a common origin and by a body of common customs.' Sharma, *Christian Missions in North India*, 9.

[25] Ibid., 12.

[26] Ibid., 13–16.

[27] See Richard and Donna Strom, *Tell the Next Generation – The First Twenty-Five Years of Presbyterian Theological Seminary Dehra Dun, U.P., India* (Dehra Dun, India: New Academy, 1995), 17f; Matthew Ebenezer, 'The Contribution of Presbyterian and Reformed Denominations in India in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', *The Puritan Ink*, 11 August 2021, https://thepuritanink.com/the-contribution-of-presbyterian-and-reformed-denominations-in-india-in-the-late-nineteenth-and-early-twentieth-centuries/.

[28] John Crosby Brown Webster, *The Christian Community and Change in North India. A History of the Punjab and North India Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A 1834-1914* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1971), 19f; Sharma, *Christian Missions in North India*, 117f; M. S. Renick, *Christian Missionary Movement in Northern India, with Special Reference to Uttar Pradesh, 1562 A.D. to 1947 – Update 1999* (Delhi, India: ISPCK, 2004), 130f.

[29] Julius Richter, *A History of Missions in India* (New York; Chicago; Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908), 204f; Cyril Bruce Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, 3rd edition (New Delhi, India: ISPCK, 2017).

[30] Richter, *A History of Missions in India*, 213.

Indian churches became an ecclesiastical province of the 'parent church' back home.[31] From 1872 on, a yearly Missionary association meeting was bringing different Reformed and Presbyterian mission societies, as well as Indian Presbyterian churches, together.[32]
The missionaries spread the Gospel by preaching in the streets, distributing literature, and engaging in apologetic meetings with non-Christians. They also reached out to the ordinary and poor people through medical care: mobile clinics, hospitals and medical colleges for training nurses and doctors.[33] Education was the mission's most important instrument as it introduced both Christian and Western learning and science to Indian society. It was seen as a way of demolishing 'superstition' and served as a preparation for the Gospel. Those who converted to Christianity met with hostility from the Hindu community, as they would no longer fulfil the caste-designed roles in the family and community, which was believed to be harmful to the community.[34] Therefore, they were often expelled from their homes and families and came to live with the missionaries in a Christian 'compound'.[35] There they adopted a Western lifestyle, received an English education, learned to dress and eat in a Western way and spoke English instead of their mother tongue.[36]
The missionaries paid special attention to the position of the women in Indian society, who often suffered from the practices of girl infanticide, child marriage, Sati and seclusion of widows. The contribution of the Presbyterian mission to the education of girls and women caused tensions on the one hand, but on the other hand, it was important for the development of Indian society as a whole, inspiring Hindus and Muslims to start similar institutions.[37]
Presbyterian missionaries trained local pastors and leaders for the church by opening several theological schools.[38] After a while, they ordained local pastors, but the churches remained under the supervision of the missionaries. Looking at the missionary work in the 19th century, Frykenberg states that the real impact of the Gospel on the local population was made by the local '*dubashis'*[39], who effectively preached the Gospel to local people in their own language.[40]
The Presbyterian missionaries demanded that converts break away from their caste, because the caste system was seen as unbiblical. This made the mission among high-class Indians very difficult, as they had much to lose by converting to Christianity and the focus on individual conversions had very little success in the cities. Therefore, the Presbyterian and other missions turned to the outcasts, *Dalits*, and villages. The mission board of the Presbyterian Church of the USA received, as did other missions, many converts from the poor 'Sweepers' in the Ganges area.[41] In the Indian communal society, converted Christians are no longer part of the Hindu caste system ('outcasts'), but form a

[31] Ibid., 432.
[32] I.e., the American Presbyterian Church, Church of Scotland, Free Church of Scotland, United Presbyterian Church of Scotland and Reformed Church of America. Sharma, *Christian Missions in North India*, 116; See also Renick, *Christian Missionary Movement in Northern India, with Special Reference to Uttar Pradesh, 1562 A.D. to 1947 – Update 1999*, chap. 7.
[33] Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, 197f.
[34] Sharma, *Christian Missions in North India*, 194–95. Missionaries were, naturally, aware of these negative sides, see, for example: Waskom J. Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India. A Study With Recommendations* (New York, Cincinnati; Chicago: Abingdon Press, 1933), 151f.
[35] Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, 182f.
[36] Nirmala Srinivasan, 'Ethnic Process and Minority Identity. A Comparative Study of Muslims and Christians of UP', in *Sociology of Religion in India*, ed. Rowena Robinson (Thousand Oaks, CA etc: SAGE Publications, 2004), 106f.
[37] Renick, *Christian Missionary Movement in Northern India, with Special Reference to Uttar Pradesh, 1562 A.D. to 1947 – Update 1999*, 181; Richter, *A History of Missions in India*, 321.
[38] Sharma, *Christian Missions in North India*, 128f.
[39] '*Dubashis'* (literally, those with two languages – not only English!) See Frykenberg, *Christianity in India*, 521.
[40] Ibid., 241.
[41] C. H. Bandy, 'The Building of the Church among Village Communities. II. The North Indian Presbyterian Mass Movement', *International Review of Mission* 8, no. 2 (April 1919): 193–204.

new community around the church, because of the shared faith in Christ and their commitment to the church community, its educational institutions and missionary activities.[42] The missionaries adhered to the Nevius method (self-government, self-propagation and self-support), but the Indian reality was, and is, difficult: most Presbyterian churches in North India grow but slowly and self-support has not yet been achieved.

3.5. Reformed Presbyterians in North India till Today

My respondents are affiliated to one of the Reformed Presbyterian Churches of India (PRCI). In 1949, the North India Presbytery of the Bible Presbyterian church was installed and the first Indian pastor was ordained, Benjamin Prasad. In 1969, the North India Presbytery of this Bible Presbyterian Church united with the Saharanpur Presbytery of the Reformed Presbyterians to form one denomination: the current Reformed Presbyterian Church of India (RPCI). One of the incentives for the unification was the common goal to start the Presbyterian Theological Seminary, which functions up to this day.[43] The churches subscribe to the Westminster Standards and affiliate themselves with the historical Calvinist tradition.[44]

The worship services are in many respects comparable to Western services, as opposed to Hindu-style worship: often worship services are not more than one hour long, sermon-centred, the believers sit in pews or on chairs, they can remain seated and close their eyes while praying and they do not take their shoes off at the entrance. Songs are sung to Hindi and Nepali melodies, but Western Christian hymns and lyrics are popular too; piano and drums are used alongside traditional musical instruments.[45]

An interesting moment is the language of worship, which is also related to socio-cultural stratification. For example, English worship services only make sense for more educated people who speak English and prefer a church with more intellectually challenging sermons.[46] I interviewed RPCI members of a 'Hindi' church, and a 'Nepali' church, which has services in Hindi and Nepali, but I also had interviews with believers from a more international, English-speaking, church. This last church conducts its worship services in English and attracts more intellectual members and visitors and according to some respondents the sermons have more theological and intellectual content.[47] This shows that the RPCI is a diverse denomination with people from various social layers of society. At the same time, among the pastors and teachers, there is a stress on intellectual understanding and a serious approach to explanation in the sermons ('expository preaching'). This is also something that characterizes the Reformed-Presbyterians churches in comparison to many Evangelical-Pentecostal churches, which focus more on emotion and practical topics.[48]

3.6. Description and Analysis of the Empirical Research

The research was conducted during three visits to North India, in 2016, 2017 and 2019. Each visit included personal conversations, interviews, visits to local churches and worship services, some

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[42] Webster, *The Christian Community and Change in North India. A History of the Punjab and North India Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A 1834-1914*, 4f.

[43] The information in this passage is distilled from personal conversations with pastors and theology teachers and from: Strom, *Tell the Next Generation – The First Twenty-Five Years of Presbyterian Theological Seminary Dehra Dun, U.P., India*; Matthew Ebenezer, 'Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Dehradun, India. The Past, Present, and Future. The Story in a Nutshell', 19 June 2019, https://ptsindia.com/admin/assets/uploads/pdf/190718156344350940736876 2.pdf.

[44] See the description of 'What is Presbyterian' at: http://ptsindia.com/school/what-is-presbyterian .

[45] See for an Indian Reformed Presbyterian reflection on the 'indigenization' of worship: Raja Krishnamoorthy, 'Indigenizing Worship: How Far Should We Go?' (Reformed Worship in the Indian Context, Dehradun, India, 2005), https://storage.googleapis.com/cicw/resources/pdf/indigenizing_worship.pdf.

[46] F-11:2; teacher; 30+ / E-24:8; father; 20+ / E-9:7; teacher; 30+.

[47] F-13:7; teacher; 30+ / F-14:1; teacher; 30+.

[48] F-11:7; teacher; 30+ / F-29:6; teacher; 30+.

Christian Seminaries, schools, and children's homes, as well as Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist temples and pilgrimage places (e.g. Haridwar and Rishikesh at river Ganges).
The religious context in North India is well documented and several sources on the Presbyterian missionary work in the 19th century shed light on the emergence of the Presbyterian churches in North India. However, recently written information on the Presbyterian Christians in North India is very limited, making it necessary to collect most information on the denominations through interviews with pastors and teachers and 'ordinary believers'. In the context of this project, there was no possibility to do participating observation, therefore the operant voice of theology is only 'registered' indirectly, through the interviews. Even so, several interesting moments of appropriations of the Reformed rite of infant baptism emerged at this level as well.

3.6.1. First Visit (21—28 April 2016)

The goal of the first visit was a general orientation on the social-religious context of the interviewees in North India and to understand the position of the Reformed Presbyterian churches in this context. I wished to understand how these churches function and especially how infant baptism is practised in general and map the normative and formal voices of theology concerning the appropriation of infant baptism.
There were several meetings with the local gatekeepers and interviews with two pastors, one missionary and five theology teachers (most of them also have earlier experience as pastors or missionaries). I have divided these interviewees into two cohorts: junior teachers (30-45) and senior teachers (45+). Most of the interviews were conducted in private homes, which made room for personal and open conversations.

3.6.2. Second Visit (15—30 July 2017)

During the second visit, I had meetings and conversations with several of the interviewees from the first visit, to clarify and explain certain aspects of the earlier interviews. The main goal was to conduct interviews with church members ('ordinary believers') to map the voice of 'espoused theology' of infant baptism. The meetings were arranged by the local gatekeepers. By the end of this visit, a group interview was conducted, in which some of the topics of the interviews were discussed more in-depth. There were seven participants (three mothers and four fathers). The participants were all young parents who had been interviewed earlier (apart from one mother, who also functioned as a facilitator).[49]

3.6.3. Third Visit (21 February — 6 March 2019)

This visit took place in the context of a study trip with students from the Theological University Kampen to North India. During this visit, I was able to ask for some clarification from the interviewees of the second visit and to conduct some more interviews, especially with members of a third Presbyterian congregation. The members of this church live in India but have their roots in Nepal and their worship services are also conducted in Nepali. I was able to conduct interviews with three young couples (6 interviewees) and one group (5 participants). Apart from that, there were two interviews with mothers only.
Another opportunity to interact on infant baptism was an invitation to give a public lecture on Calvin's theology of infant baptism, after which there was a discussion with the teaching staff and students from two theological institutions on actual questions around baptism and infant baptism in the Indian Hindu context.

[49] The group discussion was transcribed by one of the ladies present.

3.6.4. Research Population

The Indian interviewees were mostly members of a congregation of the Reformed Presbyterian Church (RPCI) in North India, but they originated from different places in India (see above). The selection of pastors, teachers and 'ordinary believers' was done by local gatekeepers.

The main informants for the formal theological voices, pastors and theology teachers, were easy to find and a total of seven interviews were conducted among younger (30+) and older (40+) interviewees. Nearly all these interviewees were raised in a Christian environment: either they originated from a Christian family or they were raised in a Christian foster home and became Christians at a later age.

For the mapping of espoused theology, I focussed first of all on ordinary believers, mainly married couples, who spoke English and who were willing to speak about infant baptism.[50] It was not always easy to find interviewees, as some people did not feel prepared to speak about a theological topic, and others did not feel free to speak because of the minority position of Christians in India. On the other hand, several interviewees indicated after the interview that they were grateful to have been able to participate, as this helped them to clarify their thoughts on baptism and to appreciate infant baptism even more. Some interviewees were surprised that a researcher from the West was interested in their opinion. In a way, empowerment of the interviewees[51] was therefore also sometimes a result of the research.

As a result of the selection criteria, most parents were relatively well educated (college education or graduate level), but there were also a few interviews with illiterate people.[52] In the case of married couples, husbands and wives were interviewed separately (with a few exceptions for reasons of translation).

The interviewees came from different religious backgrounds: some of them grew up in Christian families, and others were from Hindu parents but were brought up in a Christian foster home, even though they would regularly stay with their Hindu parents and family as well. One interviewee came from a Muslim family, another from a Buddhist family, but both were raised in a Christian foster home and therefore the direct influence of those backgrounds did not play a recognizable role in the interviews or conversations.[53] Those who came from Christian families also had different backgrounds (Roman Catholic, Mar-Thoma, Episcopal, Baptist, Presbyterian).

There is also variation in social background. Some belonged to a rich or middle-class families, others were very poor *Dalits* ('rag pickers'). They also came from different provinces and ethnic groups in India; some were from Nepali backgrounds. In this way, they represent not only a broad group of Reformed Presbyterian believers in North India, but also the socio-cultural diversity, which is so characteristic of India.

Background / Age	Pastors / teachers	Ordinary Believer Female	Ordinary Believer Male	Total
Christian family	5	5	3	13
Foster home	2	1	4	7
Hindu family		4	5	9

[50] Pastors and teachers also have their personal opinions, but as far as they have a theological training and are teaching and preaching, I take their opinions as belonging to the 'formal voice' of theology.

[51] E-22:30; father; 20+ / E-32:15; mother; 20+ / E-34:17; mother; 20+.

[52] See Chapter 2 for reflection on the choice of interviewees

[53] Even though Islam and Sikhism also have a significant presence in this region, I focus on the relation between Christians and Hinduism for practical reasons, but also because only Hinduism was mentioned in relation to infant baptism. It would be interesting to look at differences and comparisons between Christians who converted from different religious backgrounds, but this exceeds the limits of this research.

20+		9	9	18
30+	5			5
40+	2	2	2	6

Table 2 Overview Respondents RPCI North India

3.6.5. Language

All interviews with pastors, missionaries and teachers, as well as most interviews with ordinary believers, were conducted in English. Some interviews were done through a translator, and are used as additional materials in the analysis, even though no significant differences were noted.

3.7. Appropriation of Infant Baptism in RPCI North India

In the following paragraphs, I wish to describe the appropriation of infant baptism in the RPCI, North India, mainly based on interviews and field notes. After the description of each aspect of appropriation with the BBBE model ('believing-belonging-behaving-experiencing'), I reflect on the relation of the appropriation to the North Indian socio-religious context.

In line with other Presbyterian churches around the world, the RPCI churches subscribe to the Westminster Standards, but they also respect the Three Forms of Unity. For catechetical goals Dr Mohan Chacko's 'Asian Catechism', is often used: '…a catechism that is *Reformed* and *evangelical* in theology, *Asian* in its application, and *non-technical* and *contemporary* in language and style.'[54] On the one hand, this catechism follows the tradition of the Heidelberg and Westminster catechisms, its foreword mentioning Calvin and Kuyper. At the same time, it relates to the Indian context and has chapters on non-Christian religions, demon possession, eating food offered to idols, ill-treatment of women and other contextually relevant topics. Instead of the Apostles Creed (to which the Heidelberg Catechism refers), the Asian Catechism uses the Nicene Creed, which shows the original affiliation of Indian Christianity with the Eastern Christian (Thomas) tradition. While the Apostolic Creed does not mention the sacraments, the Nicene Creed states: 'We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.'[55] The Asian catechism has three paragraphs on infant baptism, which is more than the Westminster and Heidelberg Catechisms have, reflecting the fact that infant baptism is a contested practice.[56]

With regard to formal theology, it is interesting to note that, in the Form of Government, infant baptism is singled out (together with the question of God's sovereignty in salvation) as an 'identity marker' of the Reformed Presbyterian Church: '*It is necessary that every Communicant Member submits to the doctrines of the church as stated in the Westminster Standards including the doctrines of infant baptism and the sovereignty of God in salvation, notwithstanding that the measure of understanding of these doctrines will vary from individual to individual.*'[57] This shows the historical (missionary) relationship with the Reformed Presbyterian family from the West, as well as their self-identification with a conservative Reformed confessional theology. In 2015, the RPCI synod decided that if parents reject infant baptism they can only be 'associate' members, not 'communicant' members. A pastor confirmed, in reference to the Westminster Confession, that not baptizing your child is a 'kind of sin'.[58] In this way, the Reformed pastors and teachers want to protect the church from the influence of the Evangelical churches (Baptists, Pentecostals and Charismatics), who, while

[54] Chacko, *I Want to Know God. An Asian Catechism*, ii. (the italics in the citation are in the original text)
[55] Ibid., 43.
[56] See above, in Chapter 2
[57] The Reformed Presbyterian Church of India, *Form of Government*, Rev. ed. (India: RCPI, 2010), 20 (art. 4.7.0).
[58] F-8:6; pastor; 40+ / F-13:6; teacher; 30+ / F-16:4; pastor; 40+ / F-28:8; pastor; 30+.

theologically close because of their adherence to the authority of Scripture, are typically opposed to infant baptism.[59]
The practice of infant baptism differs in the RPCI congregations from which our respondents come. One church accepts that not all parents agree with infant baptism, while another church practises infant baptism, but also prays for newborn children that are not baptized (dedication), a sort of 'double practice'. A third church recognizes that not all members are fully convinced of infant baptism, but take a strict stance and change the status of those who deny infant baptism to 'associate member'.[60]

3.7.1. Believing

In this section, I wish to speak about 'believing' as an aspect of the appropriation of infant baptism. In the interviews, I asked questions such as: What does the baptismal water refer to? Is there an 'effect' of infant baptism on parents and children? Is there a relationship between infant baptism and salvation? I will also discern the voices of normative, formal and espoused theology.

3.7.1.1. A Sign of the Covenant, Not of Salvation

'According to our Indian culture, our Hindu friends think that any ritual or ceremony helps to get a free ticket to heaven or to enter into God's kingdom. But that's not our understanding. We don't get into God's kingdom through our rituals or the ceremonies.' (E-21:18; father; 20+)

One pastor expressed this parallel between Abraham and us: God said to Abraham *'bring your family and give them the sign of the covenant. God is acting today by giving us commandments, and calling us to baptism and we are obeying*.' (F-28:2; pastor; 30+)[61]
Most ordinary believers understand infant baptism as a God-given visible sign of the covenant with the believers and their children.[62] Many interviewees mentioned Abraham who had to circumcise his child and male household members as the sign of the covenant: Abraham was obedient when God ordered the circumcision of his family, so Christian parents should also baptize their children.[63] Some respondents mentioned how the people of Israel went with Moses through the Red Sea, as a symbol of baptism.[64] Some said that we must follow the example of Jesus: just as He was circumcised on the eighth day, so our children must be baptized at a young age, while others referred to the story where Jesus blesses the children.[65]
For about half of the parents, infant baptism comes close to dedicating a child to God and taking responsibility for the upbringing of the child and they don't mention any divine agency in infant baptism.[66] Other parents made seemingly 'contradictory' remarks, by stressing God's active role in baptism, while also stating that 'we put that seal of authority over the life of the child'.[67] For the other half of the parents, infant baptism is much more than a human act of child dedication or thanksgiving for new life or prayer for the health of the child: for them God is present in an intensified way in infant baptism because He ordained baptism. Through baptism, God gives his

[59] F-13:6; teacher; 30+. Also: Mohan Chacko, 'Towards a Reformed Understanding of Sacraments in the Asian Context' (Conference paper, ICRC – Asia Pacific Regional Conference, Anyang, South Korea, 13 October 2015).
[60] F-8:6; pastor; 40+.
[61] Also: E-19:5; mother; 20+.
[62] F-10:12; teacher; 40+ / F-13:9; teacher; 30+.
[63] E-19:8; mother; 20+ / E-22:10; father; 20+ / E-23:8.12; father; 20+ and E-31:10; mother; 20+.
[64] E-24:13; father; 20+ / E-25:10; mother; 20+.
[65] On the circumcision of Jesus: F-24:10; father; 20+ / E-18:11; father; / E-19:4; Jesus blesses children: mother; 20+ / F-28:20; pastor; 30+.
[66] Gr-15:19 / E-20:8; mother; 35+ / E-21:10; father; 20+ / E-22:14; father; 20+.
[67] E-25:13.15; mother; 20+.

promise of the covenantal relationship with families of believers and their children.[68] Some pastors and parents spoke about baptism as a divine 'seal' of the covenant.[69]

3.7.1.2. 'There is No Power in the Water'

'It's a washing basically, washing of our sins, you know. Because water represents, I mean… water's main purpose is to wash, to clean. And then water is also related with the blood of Jesus, you know. By the blood of Jesus, we are cleansed. ... (baptism) symbolically shows that through the blood of Jesus we are saved.' (E-24:16; father; 20+)

For the RPCI pastors and teachers, it is important to clarify that infant baptism in itself does not offer salvation and that there is no magic power in the water. A teacher explained that the idea of cleansing and forgiveness in baptism is not stressed in the teaching of the church, to avoid the Hindu idea of a magical effect of bathing: salvation is only through the blood of Christ, not through baptism, because baptism is just a sign.[70] One of the pastors explained that if parents, during the preparation for baptism, were to state that infant baptism will save their child, they will receive additional teaching before administering baptism.[71] Some pastors however mentioned that the sprinkling of the water is a visible sign and symbol of God's promise of forgiveness of sin,[72] but in a general sense: forgiveness is given only by God, received through personal faith and not through ritual performance.[73]

For ordinary believers, too, infant baptism is not a magic cleansing ritual, as in Hinduism, through which a child is saved.[74] One father said: '*Baptism doesn't save anybody (...) Because if anybody believes that through baptism we will be saved, then there is no need of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice'* (E-23:15; father; 20+). Some respondents explained that Hindus believe they receive forgiveness through rituals, such as washing in the river Ganges, and stressed that baptism is not about salvation, but only a sign of becoming part of God's family.[75] Other parents mention that there is a parallel between the washing of sin by the blood of Jesus and the washing of baptism and that, in that sense, infant baptism also speaks about salvation. They also mention that children are born sinners.[76] Some younger parents would say that baptism speaks about the cleansing of sin in a general way, something that will be relevant only in future because little children are still innocent.[77] Even though most interviewees declared that infant baptism is not decisive for the salvation or election of children, the question of what happens if a young child dies unbaptized triggered different answers. The pastors, teachers and most parents did not doubt the salvation of unbaptized infants.[78] One father added that he was sure about the salvation of an unbaptized child because Jesus said, 'let the little children come to me'.[79] Some mothers, however, were not sure and said they would regret it for the rest of their life if their child would die unbaptized.[80]

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[68] E-18:19; missionary; 40+ / E-19:3.6.15; mother; 20+ / E-23:13; father; 20+ / E-24:14.16; father; 20+ / E-25:13; mother; 20+ / E-28:2; pastor; 30+.
[69] Gr-15:5; E-21:11; father; 20+ / E-25:12; mother; 20+.
[70] F-13:11; teacher; 30+ / E-17:9; father 20+ / E-19:15; mother; 20+ / E-22:20; father; 20+ / E-23:15; father; 20+ / E-33:13; father; 20+.
[71] F-13:9; teacher; 30+ / F-18:8; missionary; 40+. Also confirmed by D-200-gatekeeper3.
[72] F-10:12; teacher; 40+ / F-18:8; missionary; 40+ / F-28:19; pastor; 30+.
[73] F-16:16; pastor; 40+.
[74] F-13:11; teacher; 30+ / E-19:3.6.15; mother; 20+.
[75] E-19:15; mother; 20+ / E-21:18; father 20+ / E-35:16; father; 20+.
[76] E-17:9; mother; 20+ / E-20:11; mother; 35+ / E-24:16; father; 20+ / E-27:16; father; 20+ / E-34; mother 20+ / E-23:14; father; 20+ / E-33:17; father; 20+.
[77] E-25:14; mother; 20+ / E-33:16; mother; 20+.
[78] F-8:22; pastor; 40+.
[79] E-21:7; father; 20+.
[80] E-31:12.14; mother; 20+; E-32:14; mother; 20+.

3.7.1.3. Protection

'*… after we receive baptism we are children of God. God has elected us, and He's protecting us from all the evil things. (…) In the Bible there are a lot of stories, like Job, he also was in some sort of problem, and even so, God was with him. And there are a lot of people in the Bible where it shows they were under God's care. There were a lot of problems in their life, but God didn't leave them.'* (E-35:21; mother; 20+)

Several parents expressed that infant baptism is important to receive God's protection and presence.[81] A mother compared infant baptism to wearing a uniform: just as a police officer wears a uniform as a sign of his function, also Christians are identified by baptism as children of God — He takes care of them.[82] But what does 'taking care' mean? One pastor remarked that believers sometimes connect the idea of 'protection' to baptism, but not in a superstitious way. 'Mature Christians' would not, for example, say: the child is not baptized 'that is why it got ill', or 'that is why bad things happen to a child.[83] Apart from this remark, pastors and teachers did not mention 'protection' as an important aspect of infant baptism but several parents did. A father expressed that infant baptism is about 'safety in Christ' in a very general sense.[84] Also to some of the interviewed mothers 'protection' is important: infant baptism signifies to them that 'God looks after the child'. God cares about all children, but He looks after baptized covenant children in a special way.[85] Some parents also added that God protects parents and children against satanic attacks and that infant baptism is referring to this.[86] Finally, some parents indicated that infant baptism protects their children from being drawn to Hinduism or being influenced by Hindu relatives.[87]

3.7.2. Reflection: Believing in a Hindu Context

Indian Christians in North India live in a predominantly Hindu environment. The river Ganges and famous religious Hindu sites, such as Haridwar and Rishikesh are close by. There are some well-known Hindu 'beliefs', such as the concepts of karma, reincarnation and caste, which shape Hinduism as a world religion.[88] But when it comes to specific beliefs about deities and worship, Hinduism is deeply pluralist and inclusive, embracing a wide variety of competing and contradictory religious beliefs and practices, differing per region, caste and individual. Hans Staffner characterised the difference between Hinduism and Christianity as follows: 'Hinduism is a culture that has room for many religions' and 'Christianity is a religion that can become incarnate in any culture.'[89] This shows the centripetal and inclusive attitude of Hinduism over and against the centrifugal and missionary attitude of Christianity.

What does 'believing' mean in the Indian Hindu context?

Firstly, 'believing' in a Hindu sense differs from a Western Christian understanding. The idea of normative creeds or dogmas is absent in Hinduism and the Christian missionary concept of a 'true religion' to which one should convert to be saved is, historically speaking, not part of Hinduism.

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[81] E-20:11; mother; 35+ / E-31:9; mother; 20+.

[82] E-31:11; mother; 20+.

[83] F-16:13; pastor; 40+.

[84] E-21:15; father; 20+.

[85] E-17:2; mother; 20+ / E-26:8; mother; 20+.

[86] E-35:7.31; mother & father; 20+.

[87] E-26:13; mother; 20+ / E-35:30; mother; 20+.

[88] Harold Coward, 'Tolerance and Responses to Religious Pluralism', *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, eds Knut A. Jacobsen et al. (Brill, 2012), 1.

[89] Cited after: Brian K. Petersen, 'The Possibility of a "Hindu Christ-Follower": Hans Staffner's Proposal for the Dual Identity of Disciples of Christ within High Caste Hindu Communities (The Jerusalem Council Applied: Proceedings of the ISFM 2006 Conference, Part II)', *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 24, no. 2 (2007): 90, http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/24_2_PDFs/24_2_Petersen.pdf.

Instead, respective religions are seen as historical expressions of a 'formless truth'. This allows Hindu nationalists to contend that Christianity is good for the West, but will not work in India, while Hinduism is apt for the Indian social context.[90]
Hinduism can be characterized as primarily '*orthoprax*' ('doing things right') in its orientation. This means that there can be a 'considerable uniformity in outward appearance' of the Hindu rites, practices and artefacts.[91] However, the complementary idea of 'orthodoxy' (right teaching), which is important in Christianity, is usually of little interest in Hinduism.[92]
Secondly, this makes it understandable that most interviewees indicated that they are not familiar with the beliefs or practices of 'classical Hinduism' as described in scholarly books on Hinduism and based on the Veda's and many other holy books[93]. They see different expressions of 'lived Hinduism', but have little understanding of it. This is partly due to the social and geographic segregation between Hindus and Christians and the mutual distrust, but it is also related to the '*orthoprax*' character of Hinduism. Even Hindus are often not well-informed about the Veda's or other religious Hindu documents and are also unable to explain the 'meaning' of certain rituals and traditions.[94] In line with this, the interviewed pastors and teachers confirmed that there are, of course, Hindu rituals of washing and that Hindus indeed expect salvation from bathing in the river Ganges, but they think that a direct influence of Hindu rituals on the practice of infant baptism is improbable.[95] In our analysis below, we will pay attention to the various layers of Hindu beliefs, rituals and other practices, to be perceptive to possible influences of the Hindu context on the appropriation of infant baptism in a more general sense.

3.7.3. Belonging

In this section, I investigate the 'belonging' aspect of the appropriation of infant baptism: what does infant baptism mean to North Indian Reformed Presbyterians in terms of 'belonging' to God, the church and the Christian or non-Christian family members and context?

3.7.3.1. Belonging to God

'I believe that in the way Jesus chose me, He has also chosen my son. And I believe the promises which are for me, are for my son as well. (...) The Bible promises that if I have chosen you, I have chosen the household. And through you, the household will be blessed.' (E-26:6; mother; 20+)

An important reason for Hindus to become Christian is to have a personal relationship with the one true God and the unique Saviour Jesus Christ, as opposed to a myriad of deities.[96] A teacher

[90] Coward cites Radhakrishnan: 'Religion is like the string of a violin: if removed from its resonant body, it will give the wrong tone, if any.' Coward, 'Tolerance and Responses to Religious Pluralism', 14.
[91] Kenneth Valpey, 'Pūja and Darśana', *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, eds Knut A. Jacobsen et al. (Brill, 29 May 2018), 23.
[92] In the 1980s, James Watson used the term '*orthopraxy*' ('doing it right') over and against 'orthodoxy' ('knowing and believing correctly') to theorize Chinese religiosity. The suffix '*prax*' here simply means 'practice'. See Chau, *Miraculous Response*, 127. This definition of 'orthopraxy' and 'orthodoxy' also makes sense in the Indian Hindu context. See for the limitations of the term from an anthropological point of view: H. A. Colijn, 'One House, Two Paths: Popular Religion and Protestant Christianity in Contemporary Chinese Households', 2018, 154f, https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/one-house-two-paths-popular-religion-and-protestant-christianity-. The term '*orthopathy*' is also used as referring to the right disposition of feeling or of the heart. See for example: John W. Morehead and Brandon C. Benziger, eds., *A Charitable Orthopathy: Christian Perspectives on Emotions in Multifaith Engagement* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2020).
[93] Michaels, *Hinduism*, 47f.
[94] Ibid., 18.
[95] F-8:21; pastor; 40+ / F-16:17; pastor; 40+. See also: Jessica Frazier, ed., *The Continuum Companion to Hindu Studies* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 233.
[96] F-13:11; teacher; 30+ / E-17:7; mother; 20+ / E-22:2.6; father; 20+.

indicated that in Hinduism a personal relationship with the deities is absent[97], therefore it is quite a leap for Indian Christians to call God their Father.[98] Respondents say indeed that they are 'child of God'[99] and they also see God as their holy or heavenly Father, and themselves as belonging to God's family, but they typically don't address God as 'Father', but as 'Lord' or 'God', while some call Jesus their 'heavenly Father'.[100]
When speaking about 'belonging to God', several parents expressed their belief in God's gracious election, through which they belong to God, together with their children.[101] Infant baptism and election do not coincide though, because infant baptism must be answered in personal faith. Parents shared that, through infant baptism, their children enjoy the blessings of God's personal care and presence in the covenant, which makes them different from children of non-believers. They are not better than children of unbelievers, but they are special because they belong to God and are brought up in the faith: they are 'saved sinners.'[102]

3.7.3.2. Belonging to the Church as God's Family

'*The pastor made an open proclamation saying that now this child is in the family of God. It is the responsibility of all of us to lead this child, we know that this child should grow in God's care, in His love, and that one day he would openly proclaim His love in his life.'* (E-25:7; mother; 20+)

The idea of the church as a community and family of God is very much present among the respondents: the church is not a building but the people.[103] One father formulates it quite strongly: '*If I'm not seeing the other person as a part of my family, there's no point of me going to church. I can worship everywhere because God is everywhere. But why I go to church is because God wants us to go to the place where God's people gather.'* (E-21:23; father; 20+)
Christian converts explain that they find a fellowship and a 'new family' in the church, in which caste divides no longer play a role.[104] They experience God's presence among Christians, which is an incentive to join the church.[105] Joining a local church is not just to find a new spiritual family, it is also part of God's calling. It was generally agreed that being chosen by God also implies joining the church and becoming part of God's family on earth. In addition, Christian baptism as a sign of entrance into the community is non-negotiable. Several interviewees stated that they were expelled from their families for it, but they are convinced that suffering is part of belonging to Christ.[106]
In addition, the children belong to the church: '*I think that he (the child) is sort of welcomed into a bigger family, God's family. Because when the Israelites were passing through the water from Egypt when they were going to this promised land, everyone passed through this river.'* (E-24:13; father; 20+)

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[97] See below § 3.6.10 for a description of '*darśana*', which shows that certain groups of Hindus do have a personal relationship with a deity.
[98] F-11:4; teacher; 30+.
[99] E-18:12; missionary; 40+ / E-21:9; father; 20+ / E-26:14; mother; 20+ / E-35:21; father; 20+.
[100] E-25:15-16; mother; 20+ / E-27:1.6.23; father; 20+ / E-32:12; mother; 20+ indicates that her son called Jesus Christ his Father. However: E-35:2; mother; 20+ says: 'God is the heavenly Father of my daughter'.
[101] E-21:6; father; 20+ / E-26:2; mother; 20+ / E-31:9; mother; 20+ / E-35:2; father & mother; 20+. See also: F-18:11; missionary; 40+.
[102] E-17:2; mother; 20+ / E-21:9; father; 20+.
[103] E-17:13; mother; 20+ / E-19:12.15; mother; 20+ / E-21:8.10; father; 20+ / E-24:13; father; 20+ / E-33:21; father; 20+.
[104] F-12:2; teacher 40+ / E-31:5; mother; 20+. This might be more true for North India than for other parts of the country. See Donald Anderson McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India*, Presumed to be 1st as edition is unstated (South Pasadena, Calif: William Carey Library, 1979), 19.
[105] F-29:3; teacher; 30+ / E-31:7; mother;20+.
[106] F-18:12; missionary; 40+ / E-20:9; mother; 35+ / E-27:12.22; father; 20+ / E-19:10; mother; 20+.

All interviewees agree that the children belong to the family of God. They often refer to Peter's speech at Pentecost: 'for you are the promises and for your children', as well as to Jesus who blesses the children.[107]
In infant baptism, God promises to take care of the children and to bless them as his own children. The parents and the congregation promise to bring up the child in the obedience of the faith. Several parents expressed that after infant baptism they feel more responsible for the upbringing of their children.[108] Being a member of the Christian family helps and protects the children: the congregation, Christian family and friends, as well as Christian schools, all help to raise the child in the faith.
As we have seen before: belonging to a specific congregation can also be related to socio-cultural stratification.[109] There can also be ethnic and historical reasons for the existence of different Christian denominations, for example, because churches were started by missionaries from different foreign denominations or mission agencies or because of the ministry to a specific ethnic group with its own language.[110] In my research, this diversity is visible in the fact that I interviewed RPCI members of a 'Hindi' church, a 'Nepali' church and a more international, English speaking, church.

3.7.3.3. Belonging to the Christian Family

'Belonging is key in the teaching of the covenant; you belong to God and the congregation. Converts find a new family in the church. At the same time, it can be a disruption with their own family, their relatives and friends, especially when people come from a Hindu background. Hindu parents often say: 'we invested so much in you and now you are no longer with us.' (F-11:5; teacher; 30+)

The boundary between Christians and Hindus in India affects all areas of life, as these are not just two religions but also two colliding worldviews. In Hinduism, the place and duty of the individual in the community is key.[111] Contested areas between Hindus and Christians are Hindu rituals and feasts, funerals and weddings, which are not only social, but according to many Reformed Christians, also religious events. A second contested area is the family, because marriages are often brokered by parents and family and Christian or Hindu families will choose a Christian or Hindu partner for their son or daughter. Several interviewees indicated that after becoming a Christian or marrying a Christian spouse, the Hindu parents severed all relationships.[112] Usually, socio-religious boundaries are re-negotiated after a while to keep relationships between Hindu and Christian family members intact. Some examples that were given by the respondents:
- Christian children can respect and honour their parents by being present at a Hindu funeral, without bringing sacrifices;[113]
- When a Hindu mother visits her Christian children, she is not forced to participate in Christian prayers, but she cannot give negative comments on Christian faith; she can say her Hindu prayers, but she cannot bring images of her deities;[114]
- An interviewee told us that he accepted marriage to a Hindu girl who was chosen by his parents because she was willing to consider becoming a Christian;[115]
- Christian women often agree to marry a Hindu man because of the pressure from the family and consequently live as an 'insider Christian': they read the Bible, pray and sometimes go to church, but

[107] E-23:8; father; 20+.
[108] E-21:10; father; 20+.
[109] See above § 3.5.
[110] E-14:1; teacher; 30+.
[111] F-18:20; missionary; 40+.
[112] E-23:6; father; 20+ / E-31:3; mother; 20+ / E-35:32; mother; 20+.
[113] E-29:1; teacher; 30+.
[114] F-29:1; teacher; 30+.
[115] E-35:15; father; 20+.

without being baptized. This is a complicated situation, in which daily humiliation and harassment are no exception;[116]
- In a mixed Hindu-Christian marriage, parents negotiate the religious upbringing of the children.[117]

The minority situation of Christians in North India makes people cautious to confess Christ publicly or to join a church. The churches therefore need wisdom and tact when receiving new members, because some Hindus go to the extreme, proclaiming that whoever accepts a person who is expelled by his family becomes an enemy as well.[118]
For parents from the North Indian RPCI, infant baptism also signifies that a child is 'claimed for God': the child is set apart, included in God's family.[119] Parents trust that, through infant baptism, God keeps the child close to Himself and away from Hinduism. Baptism then clearly indicates the Christian identity of the child and Hindu family and friends will acknowledge that the child belongs to the Christian community, and they will not force Hindu rituals on it.[120] In this way infant baptism sets a boundary between the Hindu and Christian families and communities. This 'boundary' is also meaningful for the receiving congregation, because, in the context of oppression, baptism and the preparation for baptism also functions as a sign of a genuine conversion and commitment to the Christian community.

3.7.4. Reflection: Hindu and Christian Belonging

The stories told by respondents about conversion to Christianity show how difficult it is for converts from Hinduism to join a Christian church. For many high caste people, the problem with conversion or baptism is not the faith in Jesus or the rite of baptism, but leaving the Hindu fold. As Christian converts, they are often no longer allowed by the church to participate in Hindu rituals, such as a Hindu marriage, or funeral rites for parents or other family members. In Hindu perception, a Christian convert will disturb the social and cosmic order ('*dharma*'),[121] bringing evil to the whole community and endangering the salvation of other family members. For Hindus, Christian conversion means a broken family.[122] The famous Indian theologian, Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929), wrote: 'To express respect and even admiration for Jesus Christ was common enough in India in the late nineteenth century; for a Hindu or a Sikh actually to announce a desire to become a Christian by baptism was another matter altogether. Conversion was a social and political, as well as a religious matter: a blow directed at the heart of the social unit.'[123] Today this is not much different. Hindu families often strongly reject the conversion of one of their members and expel the new Christian from their community, sometimes they are ill-treated and forced to move to another place, where they can live among Christians.[124]

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[116] F-13:13; teacher; 30+.
[117] E-32:12; mother; 20+.
[118] F-8:16; pastor; 40+.
[119] E-17:2; mother; 20+ / E-19:13; mother; 20+ / E-21:9; father; 20+.
[120] E-26:14; mother; 20+. In the case of adult baptism, interviewees also mention that it protects new believers against being pulled back into Hinduism. E-34:4; mother; 20+.
[121] B.V. Subbamma and Frank L. Roy, 'Smoothing the Paths. A Caste Hindu Tells Her Story. Compiled by Frank L. Roy from the Book 'New Patters for Discipling Hindus', in *Rethinking Hindu Ministry. Papers from the Rethinking Forum*, ed. H.L. Richard (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 2011), 116f.
[122] I used Eugene Heideman, *From Mission to Church. The Reformed Church in America. Mission to India.* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2001), 113–14. See also Webster, *The Christian Community and Change in North India. A History of the Punjab and North India Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A 1834-1914*, 242.
[123] Paul J. Pennington, *Christian Barriers to Jesus: Conversations and Questions from the Indian Context* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2017), 118.
[124] F-12:3; teacher; father 40+.

Many Reformed Presbyterian Christians reject the practical social-religious boundaries of the caste system, which is the backbone of the Hindu society, and believe in the principle of equality of all people before God. To Hindus, however, humans are fundamentally unequal, because of the 'karma', which is already gathered in former lives: the current life is the fruit of an earlier life. In practice, this human inequality leads not only to bans on intermarriage, but also forbids inter-caste meals or drawing water from the same well. Neither may religious rituals be performed together with people from different castes.[125]

For Tribals and Dalits, conversion entails the danger of being expelled from the family and the social group. The Christian community then functions as a new family, where the equality of all humans is confessed. This implies an escape from their despised position of uncleanness and untouchability in the Hindu caste system.[126] At the same time: the fact that many Dalits become Christians causes many high-caste people (Brahmins) to see Christianity as a Dalit religion so that they will not easily join a Christian congregation where all are equal.[127]

Most interviewees stressed that belonging to the Christian church is a religious, but not a social divide. They continue to love their Hindu parents and relatives and value personal relationships with them.[128] At the same time, from the interviews and many personal conversations, the need for personal conversion was stressed for those who come from a Hindu background, as well as for those from a Christian family.[129] Several interviewees indicated that some months or years after their conversion, relationships with Hindu families were restored. To achieve this, Christians often avoid theological discussions, even though big issues, such as polytheism or the unicity of Jesus come up time and again. Christians rather strive to make a difference on the ethical level: being honest, rejecting corruption, fighting addiction, going to church regularly, and showing love for the neighbour. In this way, they witness in the private and public spheres and try to show others the truth of the Christian faith and its contribution to Indian society.[130] This way of witnessing matches well with the Hindu (*orthoprax*) way of life, in which participation in, and responsibility for, the community is key.

Many Protestant churches take a strict stance concerning participation in Hindu practices and rituals. Many Hindus, however, do not discern between a social and a religious boundary. Already in 1908, the Presbyterian Reformed missionary Julius Richter wrote: 'Can a Hindu, who has come over to Christianity in baptism, remain a member of the cast of his fathers? The question can only be answered with a decided and unconditional negative. It is not the missionary who decides the matter, but Hindu society, which irrevocably expels the Christian from caste.'[131] Many interviewees

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[125] Harald Tambs-Lyche, 'Caste', in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen et al., n.d., 495–96, accessed 26 July 2022; Declan Quigley, 'On the Relationship between Caste and Hinduism', in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin D. Flood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003), 495–508.

[126] This does not mean that all caste distinctions disappear after conversion. As soon as they relate to their own family and caste members, the same structures and positions are in place. Jayaram, for example, is quite pessimistic about the actual acceptance of lower caste people in their new religious communities. They are often still the 'new' Christians or the 'such-and-such caste' Christians. N. Jayaram, 'Emancipation through Proselytism? Some Reflections on the Marginal Status of the Depressed Classes', in *Sociology of Religion in India*, ed. Rowena Robinson (Thousand Oaks, CA etc: SAGE Publications, 2004), 256–72.

[127] Indian high caste Christians often do not join the Christian church, but live as 'Bhaktas of Christ'. They contend that by remaining in their caste or social community they have the opportunity to share the Gospel with their family and friends. See Swami Dayanand Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bowl. An Analysis of Christian Failings in Communicating Christ to Hindus, with Suggestions toward Improvements*, Revised edition (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2004); Kuttiyanikkal, *Khrist Bhakta Movement*.

[128] F-18:20; missionary; 40+.

[129] See also: Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2014), 120.

[130] F-29:3; teacher; 30+. People see the positive change in the lives of Christians and become attracted – this is also found in the research of Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements*, 131f.

[131] Richter, *A History of Missions in India*, 256.

told us how, after their conversion, they lost their homes, families or communities: '*It can be very dangerous* [to openly confess Christ]*, especially in the villages. Apart from that, not only they themselves but also their parents can be in danger, as the community may look at the parents as people who did not educate their children well and the whole family may suffer from exclusion. Therefore, parents may be forced to be very harsh to their children.'* (F-30:11; teacher; 30+)
To illustrate the weight of belonging, respondents explained that new believers sometimes give in to the pressure of the Hindu family and society and stop visiting the Christian church, some returning to Hinduism. However, there is also a growing insider Movement of people who confess Jesus as their Saviour, while remaining in the Hindu fold and participating in Hindu rituals and feasts. While the interviewees from the RPCI consciously chose to become church members, they did not judge those who remained insiders, instead stressing that for those Christians the daily situation is often very difficult.[132]

3.7.5. Behaving

After discussing 'believing' and 'belonging' aspects of the appropriation of infant baptism, I now turn to the aspect of 'behaving'. I will discuss how the rite of infant baptism is prepared and administered, and its impact on the way of living by parents and children. Also, the question of infant and adult baptism will surface.

3.7.5.1. The Practice of Infant Baptism

'We start the service with the teaching of baptism. So, we would say why it is important. I think practically every baptismal service where an infant is baptised, reasons are given why we baptise children. And after that, the parents are called up to answer three or four questions in front of the congregation' (F-16:6; pastor; 40+).

Infant baptism does not take place all that often in the Reformed Presbyterian churches in North India because the congregations are not large and not all parents have their children baptized, therefore infant baptism is planned when parents request it. In one congregation, the process of preparation starts when parents come to the session and ask for the baptism of their child. At the session, there is a short interview, during which the parents can explain why they want their child to be baptized. According to the pastor, some parents ask for infant baptism out of tradition or because the church urges them to do so, some others might have magic ideas about the salvific effect of infant baptism. In such cases, the session provides some more instruction. In the church's teaching, the emphasis is on how parents look at their children[133] and pastors make it very clear that baptism does not save the child: it is a sign of the covenant and, through infant baptism, the parents take the responsibility for the Christian upbringing of their child.[134]
Another church organizes small meetings for parents to explain the meaning of infant baptism. The pastor and the elders teach them the Reformed Presbyterian understanding of infant baptism and they speak about the responsibility of the parents to raise their child in the faith.[135] Teaching on the meaning of infant baptism takes place in membership classes but also during baptismal services, as well as in preparation for the actual baptism with the parents. One father remembered that he was impressed by the sermon during the baptismal service of his child, in which the meaning of baptism

[132] F-29:11; teacher; 30+ / also: F-30:1; teacher; 30+. Some people have mixed feelings about the church as an institution and, from a postcolonial perspective, they reject baptism as a tool for proselytizing for the records of the church: 'conversion is for God, baptism for the church'. See for the insider movement for example: Kuttiyanikkal, *Khrist Bhakta Movement*, 54f.
[133] Concerning the 'formal theology': an important source for instruction is Chacko, *I Want to Know God. An Asian Catechism*, which has three Q/A's on infant baptism: AsianCat. QA 37-39.
[134] F-16:7.8; pastor; 40+.
[135] F-13:16; teacher; 40+.

was explained.[136] However, there is not always an explanation during the baptismal service, sometimes only the liturgical texts are read.[137]
Baptism is seen by the interviewed Reformed Presbyterian pastors and teachers as an entrance rite into the Christian family, the church. One church symbolically administers infant baptism at the entrance door of the church: the baptismal instruction takes place from the pulpit, but the baptismal questions and the baptism itself take place at the entrance door, where the baptismal font is placed for this event, while people are asked to turn around.[138] In this way, the belief that infant baptism signifies the entrance into the community of the church is symbolised.
The parents publicly give their answers to the baptismal questions during the service, which also means that they take responsibility for the Christian upbringing of their children.[139] Children are baptized with the Trinitarian formula ('*I baptise you in the name of the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit*') and by sprinkling water on the head of the child three times.[140] Little children are carried by one of the parents and then held by the pastor, who baptizes them.[141] After baptizing the children, the pastor places his hand on the child and thanks and prays for the good spiritual and physical development of the children.[142] In the past, some converts would have to adopt a new Christian or Biblical name at baptism, especially if their name was attached to one of the Hindu gods.[143] Today this hardly occurs and it would also be a problem to formally change the name with the government. At the same time, a pastor indicated: '*We also try to speak about the names people give to children of the covenant: if it is very strong Hindu names, we have questions'* (F-16:24-25; pastor; 40+).
Parents typically do not invite outsiders to a baptismal service, to avoid offence. Sometimes they combine a baptismal service with a birthday party. Non-Christian friends and family will not come to church, but they will come to the feast. After the worship service, the pastor can then also come to the feast and speak and pray with all family and friends present. In this way, parents try to reach out to the non-Christian family, as well as trying to avoid problems.[144]

3.7.5.2. Postponing Infant Baptism

'We waited because we thought that — let them remember a little bit when they got baptism so that they will not have any doubt that they are baptised.' (E-20:14; mother; 35+)

In many Protestant churches in Northern India, and also in the Reformed Presbyterian churches, infant baptism is administered when the children are two years or older (up to eight years old). The formal position of the church is that parents should not wait too long in asking for baptism, just as circumcision in the Old Testament took place eight days after birth. Even though some parents have their children baptized early, most parents wait for several years and the church is not pushing for it either.[145]

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[136] E-27:21; father; 20+.
[137] E-13:13; teacher; 30+.
[138] F-8:10; pastor; 40+. It is not clear where this practice is adopted from. In the times of the Protestant Reformation in the West the baptismal font was typically moved from the door to the front of the church, while in the Roman Catholic tradition the font remained mostly at the entrance of the church. In other RPCI churches baptism is administered on a platform near the pulpit – F-28:19; pastor; 30+.
[139] F-11:16; teacher; 30+; E-21:10; father; 20+.
[140] F-18:16; missionary; 40+.
[141] E-25:11; mother; 20+. See also: E-20:6; mother; 35+.
[142] E-19:12; mother; 20+.
[143] Webster, *The Christian Community and Change in North India. A History of the Punjab and North India Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A 1834-1914*, 117.
[144] F-8:19; pastor; 40+.
[145] F-8:10; pastor; 40+; F-16:16; pastor; 40+.

Parents give various reasons for postponing infant baptism, but first and foremost, they want their children to remember the fact that they were baptized: children should at least be able to see and understand a little bit about what happens to them.[146] In this way, parents can refer to baptism during the spiritual upbringing of the child. Pastors and teachers, however, would argue that the fact that infants are very young and don't understand what is happening is part of the theology of infant baptism, as it indicates that humans cannot contribute anything to their salvation.[147]
Another reason for delaying infant baptism is that Reformed Presbyterian believers wish to avoid future pressure for accepting rebaptism in another church. Often, when children grow up and leave home for study or marriage, they move to a place where there is no Reformed Presbyterian church and join a Baptist, Evangelical or Pentecostal church. These churches practise adult baptism and ask new aspirant members whether they were already baptized. If people can remember their baptism and how they were baptized, even though they were young, they can avoid being rebaptised.[148]

3.7.5.3. Sprinkling or immersion?

'… a double practice of both immersion and sprinkling would lead to 'first- and second-class Christians' because some believe immersion is a better form of baptism than sprinkling. (…) Presbyterian churches believe sprinkling is better, even though we accept new members who have been immersed in the past.' (F-16:11; pastor; 40+).

In the Reformed Presbyterian Church of India (RPCI) a study committee of the General Assembly concluded that sprinkling is the preferable and most biblical way of baptising. In the past, this church also practised immersion but the outside baptismal font has been filled in. A pastor explained the reasons for the change to sprinkling only[149]:
- a study committee of the Presbytery concluded from the exegesis of texts from Scripture that when the Greek word '*baptizoo*' is used in the Septuagint, it always means 'sprinkling', which refers to 'spiritual cleansing' or bathing. Romans 6 (which speaks about being buried and resurrected with Christ through baptism) does not speak about the mode of baptism, but about receiving 'new life' and being united with Christ, which is symbolised in baptism;
- to have different ritual forms in one church (sprinkling and immersion) creates first- and second-class Christians: some would claim to be 'truly' baptized because they were immersed, while others were 'only' sprinkled, therefore a unified practice is better;
- sprinkling is typical for the Reformed Presbyterian tradition, while for the Evangelical and Baptist churches immersion is an exclusive practice;[150]
- there is also a practical argument: immersion often takes place in the open air, but sprinkling is easily done inside the church building. In a context of growing tensions between Hindus and Christians, sprinkling, especially of adults, is less offensive than immersion.[151]

One reason for practising immersion in the past was to make the transition from a Reformed Presbyterian to an evangelical church easier for people. When church members later moved to a place without a Reformed Presbyterian Church, they would join an evangelical church. These churches would typically not accept baptism by sprinkling, and rebaptism was therefore required.
At least one RPCI pastor strongly feels sprinkling to be the right way of baptism. Most congregation members accept this policy, but they don't think this is an essential question, or preferable from a

[146] F-8:8; pastor; 40+ / F16:14; pastor; 40+ / F-18:6.10; missionary; 40+ / E-20:14; mother; 35+ / E-26:8; mother; 20+ / E-27:16; father; 20+.
[147] F-16:16; pastor- 40+.
[148] F-18:6; missionary; 40+. One father acknowledged that the delay was for all kinds of practical reasons.
[149] F-16:11; pastor; 40+.
[150] *'We believe sprinkling is a testimony of our Reformed identity.'* F-8:8; pastor; 40+; E-21:15; father; 20+
[151] F-8:20; pastor; 40+. See also: Chacko, 'Towards a Reformed Understanding of Sacraments in the Asian Context'.

Biblical point of view.[152] Neither are all theologians convinced about the arguments for 'sprinkling first' and some state that the 'mode of baptism can never make a difference'.[153] It is interesting to observe that most ordinary believers pay very little attention to the visible sign of water and are more focussed on other aspects of the worship service, such as the sermon.[154]

3.7.5.4. Responsibility in the Covenant

'We have to make them God's children, dedicate our children to God. Actually, that time they don't know what we are doing to them. So, we dedicate them in God's hand that He'll protect them. And [we say:] you are God. They are your children.' (E-20:7-8; mother; 35+)

Several pastors indicate that it is difficult for congregation members to discern between child dedication and infant baptism.[155] The responsibility and obedience of the parents seem to take a centre stage, as we have shown earlier.[156] A remarkable Old Testament reference was Exodus 4, the story of Moses who was nearly killed by God because he had not circumcised his son. One father was reminded by this story of how essential it is to have the children baptized.[157]

By having a child baptized, God is confessed as the 'Owner'. The parents entrust the child to God's protective care and promise to obediently raise the child as God's child.[158] One mother speaks of '*putting a seal of God's authority on the child'* (E-25:12; mother; 20+).[159]

Parents want their children to become a believer and to make their public profession of faith (confirmation) in the future. They recognize that this obedience is not just a human effort, but the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the child.[160] Parents fulfil their duties by praying with their children, reading the Bible and trusting that God will change the child from the inside.[161]

Some parents mention the responsibility of the congregation for the instruction and spiritual guidance of the baptized children.[162] A pastor explained that some parents send their children to Sunday school because they do not feel prepared to teach their children in the faith themselves, and needing the help of the church. He also complains that many parents arrange additional private education for their children on Sundays, to perform better at school, which prevents them from going to Sunday school.[163]

3.7.5.5. Monergism and Mutuality in the Covenant

'Infant baptism is not a supernatural power or something like that. It is God's sign of God's covenant of grace with us, and as well as with our children. God's covenant means that He will use us for his kingdom… He will use us for his work and He promises us 'you will do my ministry' — like He promised Abraham that he will be fruitful on the earth.' (E-19:6; mother; 20+)

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[152] E-22:15; father; 20+ / E-25:18; mother; 20+ / E-27:18; father; 20+

[153] F-28:19; pastor; 30+.

[154] F-13:11; teacher; 30+ / E-24:16; father; 20+ / E-33:17; father; 20+.

[155] F-8:6; pastor; 40+ / F-13:10; pastor; 30+ see also: Gr-15:22.

[156] Gr-15:13.17.23 / E-20:8; mother; 35+ / E-21:10; father; 20+ / E-22:14; father; 20+ / E-23:10.12; father; 20+ / E-25:7; mother; 20+.

[157] E-23:10.15; father; 20+.

[158] E-19:5; mother; 20 / E-24:10; father; 20+ / E-33:19; mother; 20+.

[159] Others use expressions like: 'give the child to God': F-10:19; teacher; 40+ / E-27:19; father; 20+.

[160] E-22:24.25; father; 20+ / E-23:5; father; 20+ / E-24:17; father; 20+ / E-25:10 mother; 20+ / E-27:5; father; 20+.

[161] F-18:8; missionary; 40+ / E-19:11; mother; 20+ /E-21:10; father; 20+.

[162] E-20:13; mother; 35+ / E-21:10; father; 20+ / E-26:2; mother; 20+ / E-35:14; mother; 20+.

[163] F-16:21; pastor; 40+ / F-28:1; pastor; 30+.

Pastors and teachers believe, in general, that the signs of circumcision and baptism are signs of the covenant, ordained by God.[164] Most interviewed parents agreed with this[165] and several parents expressed that we should not deprive the children of the spiritual and daily blessings of belonging to the covenant with God, by denying to baptize them.[166] However, not all parents were convinced that baptism should be given at a young age — it could also be later.[167]
Both pastors and ordinary believers stressed the human responsibility for the Christian upbringing in the covenant: infant baptism should not be a formality or tradition, but it calls parents and children to serve God.[168] A mother told us how she explained infant baptism to her child: *'Until baptism, unless we don't have a ticket, like a ticket for a train, then we can be in trouble. The conductor might ask us to leave and then you know, they might throw us out of the train, but once we have a sure ticket, then we have the assurance that we will reach our destination.'* (E-32:11; mother; 20+) She also explained that we have the responsibility to look after the ticket well. The children are passive in infant baptism, but God wants to give them faith through the Holy Spirit and He asks them to live in the covenant. In this way, God gives promises as well as the responsibility to believing parents and their children.[169]

3.7.6. Reflection: Ritual Behaviour in Hinduism and Christianity[170]

It is not difficult to notice the difference between the Hindu and Christian way of 'ritual behaviour': in Hinduism ritual attention goes to the '*orthopraxy*' ('doing it right'), while the pastors and professional theologians in the Reformed churches aim for '*orthodoxy*'. At the same time, most ordinary believers admitted that they had not thought much about the meaning of infant baptism for themselves and their children.
As I explained earlier, most Hindus are not interested in beliefs or convictions of the heart, but focus on rituals: 'If one behaves correctly, it does not matter what one believes'.[171] In Hinduism, it is important to have the right actors (priests), and the right elements and to perform at an auspicious time. Various geographic regions and castes (*jāti's*) all have their specific practices, rituals and preferred deities, but this variety all fits within the fold of Hindu '*orthopraxy*'.[172] From a Christian perspective, the Indian apologist Vishal Mangalwadi comments: 'For a Brahmin priest, who performs rituals and recites "*shlokas*", the truth of his "mantras" is irrelevant; therefore, he does not bother to translate them, as nobody needs to understand or verify. What matters is the poetry's sound, which creates the magical aura of sacredness.'[173] Other Christians would correct this and state that, for instance, funeral rites are performed with much dedication because Hindus believe in the reincarnation of the deceased.[174]
The German professor of classical Indology, Axel Michaels, pointed out that individual Hindus easily adopt practices, deities and beliefs from Christianity or Buddhism or other religions. The variety of beliefs arising from this is 'compensated' by the unifying and identity-shaping 'function' of rituals: to

[164] F-8:6; pastor; 40+ / F-10:9; teacher; 40+ / F-11:10; teacher; 30+.
[165] E-23:8.10; father; 20+ / E-26:14; mother; 20+.
[166] E-19:8; mother; 20+ / E-20:12; mother; 35+ / E-21:12; father; 20+ / E-34:2; father; 20+.
[167] Gr-15:2 / Gr-15:19 / Gr-15:20.
[168] Gr-15:21 / E-17:8; mother; 20+ / E-21:10; father; 20+ / E-23:12; father; 20+ / E-25:13; mother; 20+ / E-26:13; mother; 20+.
[169] E-19:5; mother; 20+ / E-22:18; father; 20+.
[170] According to Axel Michaels, there is not one fitting translation for the word 'ritual' in Sanskrit – Axel Michaels, *Homo Ritualis: Hindu Ritual and Its Significance for Ritual Theory*, 1st ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8f.
[171] Cited after: Jessica Frazier, *Hindu Worldviews: Theories of Self, Ritual and Reality* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 142. Also: Michaels, *Homo Ritualis*, 2.
[172] Valpey, 'Pūja and Darśana', 23.
[173] Mangalwadi, *Missionary Conspiracy*, 50.
[174] D-199 – gatekeeper I2

perform a ritual means to enact the claim of the unchangeability of the Hindu way of life. Ritual practice is a way to 'solve' individual and social problems, as the performance of rituals expresses the social norms of Hinduism.[175] Michaels discerns between 'religion' and 'religiosity': in Hindu rituals, participants may believe in some 'elevated principle' or 'total order' ('*dharma*') of a society, but 'religiosity' — in the sense of an individual, psychical or emotional side of religion — is not required.[176]

Speaking of infant baptism, the Reformed tradition has confessions and liturgical forms which formulate its theological 'meaning', even though the 'experience' of participating in the ritual is a valuable aspect, which cannot be reduced to intellectual categories. In Hindu perception, the 'meaning' of ritual is in the performance itself and cannot be grasped in words, there is no 'normative theology' which describes or defines the 'meaning' for Hindu believers.[177] However: the fact that the meaning of a ritual cannot be explained in words, does not mean that it is 'meaningless' to its performers. The manifold rituals connect the Hindu devotees to the 'sacred narrative' of the cosmos. The various sacrifices, feasts and pilgrimages structure the existence of individual Hindus and Hindu society sanctifies all aspects of life by keeping life in good and auspicious order ('*dharma*').[178] The laws and regulations for various castes, professions, stages of life and gender relations must be observed, in order to safeguard the right order in society and keep it felicitous.[179] Hindus perceive Christian conversion and baptism as a rejection of Hindu culture, practice and tradition, a disturbance of the cosmic order, which endangers the fate of the family and community. Several of our respondents explicitly locate the meaning of conversion in a personal conviction and a choice for the one true God and Jesus as the unique Saviour, while for many Hindus the meaning of conversion would be, first and foremost, the rejection of the Hindu community and the ritual obligations necessary to maintain the balance in society.[180]

This attitude to 'behaving' also seems to affect Christian church members. For them, it is important to fulfil their duties as Christians, such as daily Bible reading, praying and going to church regularly. Yet, going to church does not necessarily mean participating in the worship service. Some remain outside the building or miss the sermon and have social meetings instead, but they still 'went to church'.[181] One teacher remarked that *'it seems sometimes to be more like collecting 'karma' or 'doing good deeds', than a 'reasonable faith'* (F-29:7; teacher; 30+). Another example is that, for a certain group of congregation members, it seems to be fine if they don't understand the sermons, or cannot formulate their beliefs.[182] Against the backdrop of Hindu ritualism, it appears that, for many ordinary believers, behaving in compliance with the Christian norms in church and as an act of obedience to God is as important as (theological) understanding.[183] At the same time, we also notice a more westernised trend among Reformed Presbyterians. An example of this is that one of the churches to which interviewees belong has its services in English, which attracts more educated

[175] I follow the explanation of 'ritual' in Hinduism by Michaels, *Homo Ritualis*, 31ff. See also: Kuttiyanikkal, *Khrist Bhakta Movement*, 265.

[176] Michaels, *Homo Ritualis*, 37.

[177] Frazier, *Companion to Hindu Studies*, 11.

[178] Angelika Malinar, 'Hindu Cosmologies', *The Continuum Companion to Hindu Studies*, ed. Jessica Frazier (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 62.

[179] Frazier, *Companion to Hindu Studies*, 29.

[180] F-13:11; teacher; 30+ / E-17:7; mother; 20+ / E-22:2.6; father; 20+. Compare: Michaels, *Homo Ritualis*, 38. See for a discussion about the meaning of conversion in India, for example: Sebastian C.H. Kim, *In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversion in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[181] F-29:6; teacher; 30+ and personal observations.

[182] F-29:7; teacher; 30+.

[183] This applies to the understanding of adult baptism as well. Some interviewees shared how they were baptized as teenagers or adults in a Pentecostal or Baptist church, without understanding the meaning of baptism at that moment (E-22:9-10; father; 20+).

believers who want to have good sermons, which help them to understand the Gospel better and show them how to live as Christians.

3.7.7. Experiencing

In this aspect of appropriation, I enquired into the experience of God's active presence in and through infant baptism, as well as into the religious feelings or emotions of the parents.

3.7.7.1. Experiencing God's Intensified Presence at Infant Baptism

'During his baptism, I felt like there was a ray that came from heaven and then, we were going from darkness towards the light.' (E-32:12; mother 20+)

In the first place, several parents indicated that, during infant baptism, they experienced God's presence intensively and in an almost tangible way.[184] Some parents attributed this experience, especially to the Holy Spirit.[185] One father tells: *'When a child is baptised, at that moment, I believe that God is also standing there. He is watching and He is making that covenant. As if a person is standing there, like He is giving his hand: "I am making a covenant with you, with the family and the child. So, this is My covenant that you are My family member and from now onwards, you belong to Me that child"'.* (E-23:13; father; 20+).

These religious experiences do not transform baptism into something 'magic' for the participants but point to an 'intensified presence' of the personal God of the covenant during baptism.[186] Interestingly enough, teachers and pastors did not mention this intensified presence of God in baptism, nor did they refer to the Holy Spirit. Instead, they referred to a more general caring presence of God in the covenant of grace, of which baptism is a sign. However, when some pastors later learned about these experiences of ordinary believers, they confirmed, that they recognize this.

Secondly, parents said that in infant baptism they receive a personal assurance that their children belong to God. What is intellectually believed about God's salvation and grace, becomes visible and tangible in baptism. Some parents expressed that baptism is not just a sign, but also a divine seal of the covenant, a seal of God's ownership.[187] This brings them a feeling of trust and peace: God takes care.[188] The Holy Spirit will keep the children from returning to Hinduism.[189]

Thirdly, parents also felt reassured, because baptism signifies that their child now belongs to the community of the church, the family of God, which protects the child against being involved in idolatrous Hindu rituals or demonic attacks.[190] This divide between Hindus and Christians is also painful: many interviewees expressed feelings of regret and sorrow about broken relationships with Hindu relatives and friends and also their hope that relatives and friends might become Christians as well.[191]

Fourth, many parents expressed feeling happiness or emotional excitement at the moment of the baptism of their child: '*God has been very gracious to me. And God has been very gracious to my son as well. And that was the most joyous moment of my life. (...) It's a joyous time because I can be a testimony to people. The way God chose me, blessed me, and the promises are not just for me, but*

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[184] This presence was witnessed by parents at their own baptism as adults, as well as at the baptism of their children.

[185] E-27:19; father; 20+ / E-34:8; mother; 20+ / E-35:23; father; 20+.

[186] E-23:13; father; 20+ / E-32:12; mother 20+.

[187] E-21:11; father; 20+ and Gr-15:5. See also above par. 4.6.2.

[188] *'Now I have given my child into God's hand, and then He can only, He will only direct him and you know, protect him and take care of him.'* (E-31:1.9; mother; 20+). Also: E-34:4; father; 20+ / E-35:21; father; 20+ /

[189] E-34:4; father; 20+.

[190] E-26:14; mother; 20+ / E-35:31; mother; 20+ / Gr-71:2.

[191] E-22:3; father; 20+.

also for my child.' (E-26:7; mother; 20+).[192] Infant baptism signifies God's grace as well as His choice of the child. This gives parents a feeling of joy and peace.[193]
Fifth, baptism speaks of God's protection. On the one hand, most of the parents denied that baptism has magical power, but many added that, in baptism, God yields protection because it indicates that the child belongs to God. One mother shared that she was afraid she could die someday and would not be able to take care of her child. After baptism she felt relieved: even if she would pass away, God would take care of her child.[194] Several parents expressed that they feel their child is now protected against Hindu influences when being with Hindu relatives or friends.[195] However, pastors and teachers were reluctant to speak about 'protection' through infant baptism. One pastor stated that some less mature members might think of protection, but that most congregation members would deny any 'magical' character of infant baptism.[196]
Sixth, several parents stated that, after the baptism, they felt the responsibility for the Christian upbringing of their child stronger: as parents, they 'have to do their part' in the Christian education.[197]
Finally, some parents testified that they felt peace in their hearts, that by baptizing their child they were obeying God's commandment.[198] Some added that they felt confirmed in 'doing the right thing' because the child did not cry and was very silent during the baptismal service: it seemed the child understood what was happening to her, indicating that God was actively present.[199]

3.7.8. Reflection: Experiencing Divine Presence in Hinduism in North India
With regard to the aspect of 'experiencing', what is most impressive is the claim of a number of parents that they experienced God's intensified presence during the baptismal rite, something that was not mentioned by the pastors or the teachers. Various informal conversations confirmed that experiencing divine presence or seeing angels in daily life is quite common among Indian Christians. Parents also relate this to the Reformed practice of infant baptism.
As described earlier, in Hindu rituals the performance ('orthopraxy') is seen as decisive, and not the right understanding ('orthodoxy'). However, this does not exclude a personal relationship or interaction with the Hindu deities. What is interesting for our research: there also seems to be a parallel between experiencing God's presence in Hindu rituals and in what parents tell about their experiences during infant baptism. Therefore we shortly describe, how experience functions in the Hindu rituals called '*pūjā's*'.
Firstly, Hindus pay respect to statues or images of deities: through sacrificial gifts and the recitation of mantras, a Hindu devotee 'entertains' the object of veneration, shows 'hospitality' and in this way (s)he hopes to receive blessings.[200]
Secondly, the experience of 'participation' in the life of the venerated object is essential in the monistic worldview of Hinduism, in which deities are present everywhere. The river Ganges, for example, is believed to be a goddess, who absorbs and washes away all human impurities. For

[192] Also: E-22:22; father; 20+.
[193] E-31:9; mother; 20+. It is good to notice that God's choice is not so much seen as 'eternal election', but as 'belonging to the covenant of God', to which the child itself has to answer in faith when it grows up. (F-18:11.12; missionary; 40+)
[194] E-31:9; mother; 20+.
[195] E-35:30; mother; 20+.
[196] F-16:3; pastor; 40+.
[197] E-17:3; mother; 20+.
[198] E-23:8; father; 20+ / E-31; mother; 20+.
[199] E-25:11; mother; 20+ / E-26:8; mother; 20+.
[200] Valpey, 'Pūja and Darśana', 8.

Hindus who perform ritual bathing in the Ganges, the river is like a mother who cleans up the mess of the children, who take away human sin and problems and is a source of love and forgiveness.[201] Thirdly, during *pūjā* rituals, a Hindu worshipper may reach '*darśana*', a deeper personal experience or direct 'vision' of the venerated divine or superior object. Looking at the image of a deity with concentration becomes 'a vehicle for participation in the essence and nature of the person or object looked at.'[202] In '*darśana*' the worshipper gazes upon but also wants to be seen by, the deity or venerated object. By 'being seen', healing, protection, or liberation from demonic possession can be received. Some people visit a temple daily, before they go to work, to 'have '*darśana*', to be 'seen' by a deity.[203]

These expressions seem interestingly parallel to what the respondents tell about their experience around baptism: the sense of an intensified divine presence, trust in God's protection, and participation in the divine presence. A Christian mother elaborated in an interview about her own baptism: '*…as I was not baptized, I felt very emptiness in me. (…) But after getting baptized I feel fullness. I feel the Lord is over me. He's always keeping watch over me. (…) He's coming in me and He's taking control of me. Now this body is not for me, it is His.'* (E-35:20; mother; 20+). This illustrates that new ideas are typically appropriated 'in terms of ideas we already have'.[204]

3.8. Mutual Relationship between Believing, Belonging, Behaving and Experiencing

After having discussed the four aspects of appropriation, I now look at the mutual relationship between these aspects, which together form the 'baptismal narrative' for this context.

3.8.1. Believing and Belonging

In general, the question of 'conversion' and the social-religious divide between Hindus and Christians looms large in North India. Different understandings of the meaning of religion, dogma, culture and community make an interreligious conversation difficult and this easily leads to mutual alienation and social segregation. For most of the respondents, believing in the one true Christian God also implies joining the Christian church and being baptized. The option to remain an 'insider Christian' in the Hindu fold is not judged by our respondents, but they prefer to become a Christian publicly.

Christians from Christian families are not seldom raised in segregation and are sometimes effectively shielded from Hindu religiosity. New Christians are often pushed into segregation, by being expelled from their Hindu community. Other converts from a Hindu background chose segregation out of fear of being 'pulled back' into Hinduism. Those from a mixed or Hindu religious family background seem to feel freer to look for ways to build bridges with Hindus than those who are from a Christian family. Building relationships is not easy, because Hindus, too, draw their socio-religious demarcation lines, especially those who promote *Hindutva*.

All interviewees are eager to avoid the provocation of Hindu sensitivities, but the interviewees clearly distance themselves from Hindu religious practices, even at the price of alienation from their Hindu families. Christians often find a '*modus vivendi*' with their Hindu relatives, but sometimes family ties are severed. The divide because of 'believing' and 'belonging' frequently causes tensions in families. Usually, infant baptism does not cause additional tensions with Hindu relatives, because it is perceived as a 'consequence' of the fact that the parents are Christians. Parents 'claim their children for Christ' through infant baptism, and believe that God makes a covenant with the believers and their children. In this context, it is important that the Reformed church serves as an

[201] Kelly Alley, 'Gaṅgā', *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, eds Knut A. Jacobsen et al., 2018.
[202] Valpey, 'Pūja and Darśana', 13.
[203] Ibid., 17.
[204] See Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, xvi.

inclusive community, a new and safe family for converts, which supersedes the Hindu family, even though the tensions with the Hindu relatives remain painful.[205]
The question of 'believing and belonging' also arises with respect to the ecumenical position of the Reformed Presbyterian churches in India. Here we see a difference between formal and espoused voices of theology. For pastors and teachers, the divide between Reformed and other denominations is first of all because of 'beliefs' (doctrine), such as infant baptism. For ordinary believers, 'belonging' (personal relationships) is a major factor,[206] while doctrinal differences are often not perceived as essential.[207] In this sense, ordinary believers are closer to the Hindu culture, where belonging is expressed in '*orthopraxy*' instead of '*orthodoxy*'.
This difference between leaders and ordinary believers is also visible in the perception of infant baptism: some believers who do agree with infant baptism, also contend that God goes his own way with every person and they disagree with a strict policy of making infant baptism a requirement for full membership.[208] In one of the three researched RPCI congregations, infant baptism is practised next to child dedication. However, even though ordinary believers might be more '*orthoprax*' they are also reminded of the function of infant baptism as an 'identity marker', for example, when they move to another place, where there is no Reformed church and want to join an Evangelical-Pentecostal or Baptist church. In this case, infant baptism is not accepted and rebaptism is required. Others testify that Evangelical-Pentecostal family members denounce infant baptism as a mere traditional ritual because the child has no personal faith yet. As we have seen, this is a reason for parents to postpone infant baptism.

3.8.2. Believing and Behaving

The relationship between believing and behaving shows a shared understanding that infant baptism signifies the covenant between God and the believers with their children. Infant baptism is not seen as magic, to be sure, and does not 'save' the child, but for ordinary believers, it symbolizes the washing and cleansing of sin through the blood of Christ; some respondents also speak about the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.[209]
Pastors and teachers noted that there should be more teaching in the church about infant baptism, among others. Some teachers confirmed that church members are often not interested in teaching, but follow the rules and practices of the church community.[210] Above, I also remarked on the prevalence of behaving (*orthoprax*) over believing (*orthodox*) in the Hindu context. However, some teachers understand this first of all against the backdrop of the minority situation of North Indian Christianity: most Christians are not interested in 'minor' theological or doctrinal differences, but strive for a loving and 'attractive' Christian life, so as to be able to win over their Hindu brothers and sisters.[211]
Due to their theological education, Reformed theology teachers and pastors are more open to a Western way of doing theology and often adopt the mindset of Western '*orthodoxy*': most books they use are from the West, among other reasons, because the Reformed community produces a fountain of literature. Most pastors and teachers have personal relationships with the worldwide Reformed family, speak English, visit international conferences and a number of them studied in the West. For ordinary Christians, the '*orthoprax*' mindset seems to be more characteristic, as they deal

[205] Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 122.
[206] The divides among Christians add to the complicated situation of the churches in India. Some interviewees indicated that opposition against the baptism of their children did not come from Hindu relatives, but from evangelical-Pentecostal relatives and friends, who do not accept the validity of infant baptism.
[207] F-8:15; pastor; 40+ / F-16:3; pastor; 40+.
[208] E-25:16; mother; 20+.
[209] E-18:19; missionary; 40+ / E-25:10; mother; 20+.
[210] F-13:12; teacher; 30+.
[211] F-29:4; teacher; 30+.

with Hindu relatives at home, colleagues at the workplace and have much less interaction with international Reformed believers.[212]
The RPCI's choice for sprinkling as the preferable form of baptism seems, at first sight, fitting with the *orthoprax* orientation in the Indian context. However, it is perhaps better understood as a manner of self-identification of the Reformed-Presbyterian churches over and against Evangelical-Pentecostal churches, who practise immersion as the only correct mode of baptism. In addition, it is just a practical way to avoid tensions with the Hindu community, which is fully understandable in a context that increasingly constrains the freedom of religion.[213]

3.8.3. Behaving and Belonging

Looking at the relation between behaving and belonging, all interviewees agree on the importance of 'covenantal obedience': belonging to God's covenant and the church implies baptizing the children, dedicating them to God, who will protect them, while the parents take responsibility for the Christian upbringing of the children. Obedience to God's commandments is possible through the renewal of the Holy Spirit, who gives faith to the parents and the children when they grow up.[214]
Some Christian parents from a Hindu background were baptized as adults in an Evangelical church and nurtured their personal testimony at baptism as a precious memory. Most parents look forward to the public profession of faith or confirmation of their baptized children. To the parents, infant baptism is not so much an 'entrance ritual' or sign of belonging to the church, as the first step on the path of obedient living in the covenant of grace, in which personal conversion and a public confirmation of infant baptism are necessary next steps to communicant membership. This shows that even though ordinary believers are not used to theological reflection and perhaps less interested in 'orthodoxy', they do not have their children baptized as a mere ritual in a Hindu '*orthoprax*' fashion. Instead, they feel responsible before God and the church for a daily '*praxis pietatis*' and Christian lifestyle, which flows from their promise at infant baptism.

3.8.4. Experience and Believing, Behaving, Belonging

During the analysis, it became clear that, in the North Indian context, the aspects of believing, belonging and behaving all relate in a certain way to 'experiencing'.

a. In the relation between *experiencing and believing*, ordinary Christians expressed their assurance of salvation through the death of Christ, even though this was not directly related to infant baptism. They feel blessed to know the one personal Christian God who revealed himself clearly in the Bible, over and against the overwhelming number of Hindu deities and myths. Many interviewees expressed faith in God's care for his children in all situations and, even if children were to die in infancy, they would be sanctified in the believing parents.
Parents also find comfort in having direct access to God through prayer and the Holy Spirit, without the intermediates of gurus, idols or rituals. God's immediacy and personal attention are also attributed to Jesus, whom some respondents call 'Father'. Theological distinctions between God and Jesus appear to matter less than this personal relationship.
Together with their children, believers receive a place in the Christian family of God. The belief in God's gracious election was expressed in relation to infant baptism and functions in the North Indian context as a kind of 'empowerment' for Christian families. A mother explained how privileged she felt when she realized that she was chosen by God: now she is no longer an outcast.[215]

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[212] F-8:21; pastor; 40+.
[213] Ahmad, 'State Anti-Conversion Laws in India'.
[214] E-24:14; father; 20+ / E-25:10; mother; 20+. See also on the work of the Holy Spirit: E-22:25; father; 20+ / E-27:19; father; 20+ / E-34:8; father; 20+.
[215] E-31:5.7; mother; 20+. This 'empowerment' through the preaching and hearing of the Gospel of God's love for them is also mentioned by interviewees in Picket's research: 'Belief in the love of God for them, enlivened

b. One of the teachers confirmed, that the concept of 'relation' is also a Hindu concept.[216] Here it is important to notice the different understandings of Hindu and Reformed Christian spirituality: for Reformed believers, the 'spiritual experience' is oriented toward the one God and Christ as the unique Saviour, who is above and outside of us ('vertical'), while in Hinduism the worshipper strives for 'seeing' and 'participating in' the object of veneration, which is present in a material way (horizontal).[217] In the Reformed Christian experience, the difference between Creator and creature is indelible, while, for example, in Vedic (*Advaita Vedanta*) Hindu spirituality, the boundaries fade away in a monistic understanding of being. This means that conversion to Christianity also implies the 'abandonment of the Hindu monistic worldview'.[218] In addition, revelation in Scripture also offers cognitive knowledge of God in Christ. While religious experiences of divine presence in Reformed understanding go beyond cognitive knowledge, they are not separated from it. In *Advaita Vedānta* experience is, first of all, a mystery, intuitive and beyond rationality, while in Reformed understanding the experience of divine presence remains anchored in the unique incarnation of Jesus Christ as revealed in the canonical Scriptures.[219]

c. The relation between Christian *experiencing and belonging* is significant for ordinary believers. Firstly, many of them relate their faith in God's protection of their baptized children against evil people, against being attracted to Hinduism, magic practices and idolatry. For ordinary believers, this feeling of protection can be strengthened by the experience of God's 'intensified presence' at the moment of infant baptism, which assures them of a personal and gracious relationship with God. Secondly, interviewees from a non-Christian background, in particular, point to the painful divide between Christians and Hindus, which also becomes visible in baptism. They strive to overcome this tension by showing an open and loving attitude towards Hindu brothers and sisters.

d. In the relation between *experience and behaving*, believers express that they receive peace by 'doing the right thing' in infant baptism. Some referred to the fact that the baptismal service went so well and the child was remarkably quiet. Other parents recollect that they received peace of mind after deciding to have their child baptized. Also, the 'good' behaviour when a child grows up, is seen as a blessing and confirmation that infant baptism was indeed according to God's will. 'Obedience' was mentioned often by pastors, teachers and ordinary believers, typically related to 'following' Jesus. At first sight, this may seem to resemble how Hindus follow a guru or religious leader and fulfil all his requirements.[220] However, it is important to observe that for Christians 'obedience' is seen in terms of mutual covenantal obligations (such as the Christian upbringing of the children) and not as 'ritual observance'.

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and empowered by their worship, helps to create or to strengthen a sense of their value.' Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements*, 128.

[216] D-199 – gatekeeper I2.

[217] Anthony, Hermans, and Sterkens, 'A Comparative Study of Mystical Experience Among Christian, Muslim, and Hindu Students in Tamil Nadu, India', 273f.

[218] Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 120.

[219] I am aware of the discussions involving the role of the Spirit in world religions and the way in which Samartha and other Indian theologians try to build bridges between Hinduism and Christianity, but this goes beyond the scope of this research. See Kirsteen Kim, *The Holy Spirit in the World: A Global Conversation* (London : Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2007); Benno van den Toren, 'Discerning the Spirit in World Religions: The Search for Criteria', in *The Spirit Is Moving: New Pathways in Pneumatology : Studies Presented to Professor Cornelis van der Kooi on the Occasion of His Retirement*, eds Gijsbert van den, Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman, and Maarten Wisse, Studies in Reformed Theology, Vol. 38 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 215–31.

[220] See Knut A. Jacobsen, 'Gurus and Ācāryas', *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, eds Knut A. Jacobsen et al. (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2018).

3.9. Baptismal Narrative: a North Indian Appropriation

Infant baptism is a symbolic washing of sin, even though not all parents believe that children are born in sin. It is not a magic rite to receive salvation but ordained by God as a visible sign and seal of the covenant and God's election (believing).

Infant baptism also signifies the privilege of belonging to the family of God and functions as a social and religious identity marker, which symbolizes the difference between the Reformed and Evangelical-Pentecostal communities, but also claims the child for Christ over and against Hindu relatives and friends (belonging).

The promise of the parents to take responsibility for the upbringing of the children often receives more emphasis than God's promise at baptism. Parents want their children to see and remember what happens in infant baptism and therefore baptism is mostly administered at age two or three (behaving).

Parents trust in God's protection of their baptized children against evil people, and attraction to Hindu practices and idolatry. Some experience God's 'intensified presence' or the work of the Holy Spirit at the moment of infant baptism, which strengthens their confidence in a personal relationship with the one true God (experience).

The Baptismal narrative can be visualized in this way

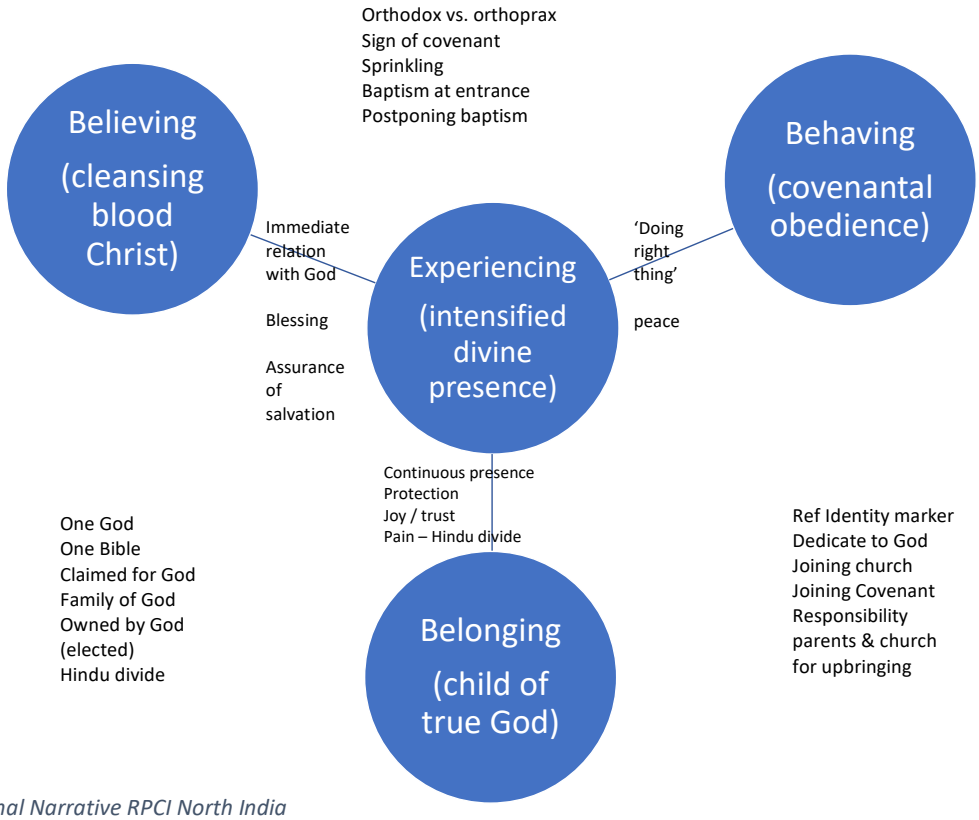

Figure 3 Baptismal Narrative RPCI North India

3.10. Summarizing Reflections

The RPCI is in a minority position in a dominantly cultural-religious Hindu environment and is also very small compared to the Evangelical-Pentecostal churches, which reject infant baptism. Infant baptism is taught and administered by the pastors and theology teachers, who are part of the 'worldwide Reformed family': they have been educated in English and participate actively in international Reformed networks and conferences. The theology teachers use mostly Western

theological resources and have often been trained in Western institutions; local Reformed seminaries were started in cooperation with Western Presbyterian mission organisations.[221] The ordinary believers I have interviewed are, on the one hand, educated in the context of the Reformed Presbyterian church, but they also make their own appropriation of the rite of infant baptism, which corresponds to their context and cultural-religious background in which both Hinduism and Evangelical-Pentecostal or Baptist Christians are prominent:
- over and against the Hindu salvific rites, respondents state: we are saved by Christ, but not by baptism;
- magical connotations of infant baptism are rejected, but often the promise and responsibility of the parents is emphasized at the expense of God's promise of forgiveness; in this way, the difference between infant baptism and child dedication is at risk of being blurred;
- the teaching of the covenant, God's eternal election and (infant) baptism offers a framework for Christian belonging, which competes with Hindu bonds;
- infant baptism 'claims' a child for the Christian family and protects it against the threat of Hindu religiosity and provides a 'safe mode' to maintain the relationships with Hindu relatives and friends;
- the pressure by Evangelical-Pentecostal churches, which demand rebaptism when believers want to join their church (in case there is no Reformed-Presbyterian church in the neighbourhood), is answered by delaying or postponing infant baptism to a moment that a child can see and remember that it was baptized;
- the idea of 'sprinkling only' by some RPCI pastors seems to be mainly related to the theological self-identification over and against Evangelical-Pentecostal churches, but to most ordinary believers this is not a crucial issue;
- in the Hindu worldview, the presence of a myriad of deities and spiritual forces is a daily reality. The experience of an intensified personal divine presence at (infant) baptism signifies and seals for parents the trustworthiness of the one true God and the unicity of salvation in Christ. This concurs for many respondents with other powerful experiences of God's help and protection in their lives. In the '*orthoprax*' and hostile Hindu context, these Christian experiences of God's help and presence, also in relation to infant baptism, seem more important and convincing than theological arguments.

The appropriation of a Reformed theology of infant baptism in India is developing, in discussion with both Hinduist and Evangelical-Pentecostal voices. This raises the question of what will happen to the Reformed narrative of infant baptism in India if pastors and teachers integrate the idea of intensified divine presence in their baptismal theology. Could the current emphasis on the communal aspect of infant baptism and parental responsibility be balanced with more attention to God's gracious promises in baptism? One respondent stated that, for her, Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship.[222] Could the Reformed relational concept of the covenant and the infant baptism as a sign of inclusion, be used to build new bridges toward Evangelical-Pentecostal and Hindu relatives?

[221] Strom, *Tell the Next Generation – The First Twenty-Five Years of Presbyterian Theological Seminary Dehra Dun, U.P., India*.
[222] E-25:2; mother; 20+.

4. Appropriation of Infant Baptism in CCAP Nkhoma Synod, Central Malawi

In this chapter, I will be answering the second part of the first sub-question, by investigating the appropriation of infant baptism of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), Nkhoma Synod, Central Malawi. I first wish to give a short description of the context of these churches, this being the context in which they practise infant baptism. Next, I will describe and analyse the results of the empirical research and relate the findings to the cultural-religious context

4.1. Socio-Economic and Cultural-Religious Context

Malawi is situated in South-East Africa and is often called the 'warm heart of Africa', referring to the friendly mindset of the people. Today's Malawi was formally colonized in 1891 and named 'British Central Africa Protectorate'. In 1907, the official name became Nyasaland ('Land of the Lake'). When it gained independence in 1964, the country was named Malawi.[1] The population groups have lived together peacefully since the Independence,[2] even though tribalism is present at many levels of society, as well as in the churches.[3] Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. Nearly half the population is under fifteen years of age, health care is vulnerable and HIV/AIDS is rampant.[4] The economy of the country relies heavily on small-scale agriculture and many villagers live in poverty, often on the brink of starvation, despite the many NGOs and relief organizations present in the country.[5] Important reasons for this are the weak infrastructure and corruption. Around 83% of the population lives in the villages, where the level of education is often very low because of minimal educational resources, facilities and large school classes with up to 150 children.[6] Villagers often feel comfortable with the quiet pace of life in rural areas,[7] but young and more ambitious people move to one of the few cities to look for work and education and to escape the socio-economic constraints of a poor rural community.[8]

[1] See Christoff Martin Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi: The History of the Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian, 1889-1962* (South Africa: Stellenbosch University, 1980), 16f. For a general overview on the relation between British colonialism and mission in Malawi, see also: A. N. Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 267–74.

[2] Under pressure of resistance movements, Malawi became independent in 1964. See John McCracken, *A History of Malawi: 1859-1966* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2012).

[3] Humphreys F. Zgambo, 'The Church Divided Based on Ethnicity: An Analysis of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Structures in Malawi', *Journal for Christian Scholarship - Tydskrif Vir Christelike Wetenskap* 2017, no. 2 (2017).

[4] In 2019, an estimated 9.5% of the adults between 15 and 49 suffered from HIV/AIDS – https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/malawi/ (accessed 01/02/2021).

[5] For a more in-depth description of the problem of poverty in Malawi see C.E.J. Msangaambe, 'Lay Empowerment with Regard to the Missional Task of the CCAP in Malawi' (Doctoral Dissertation, Stellenbosch University, 2011), 72ff, https://scholar.sun.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10019.1/6750/msangaambe_laity_2011.pdf?sequence=1.

[6] An interesting illustration is that the form for adult baptism of the CCAP Nkhoma asks of new members: 'Do you promise to read the Word of God? If you cannot read on your own, do you promise that you will make an effort to have someone read for you?' CCAP Nkhoma Church Liturgy, Ch. 17.

[7] FN-59:37; FN-150:9.

[8] Msangaambe, 'Lay Empowerment', 95f.

On the African continent,[9] we can discern three major religions: African Traditional Religion (ATR)[10], Christianity and Islam. Islam is especially dominant in the 20/40 window of Africa.[11] In Sub–Saharan Africa, some 10-15% of the population is Muslim, while around 63% is Christian (2018).[12] Adherence to ATR is hard to define, but it is an estimated 10–15% of the African population.[13] Both Christianity and Islam are growing in Africa due to conversions from ATR. In Malawi, Sub-Saharan and Eastern Africa the religious affiliations of the population are approximately the following:[14]

	Malawi	Sub-Saharan Africa[15]	Eastern Africa[16]
Protestant[17]	33.5% - CCAP 14.2% - (neo-)Pentecostal 7.6%	58.7%	65.9%
Other Christians	26.6%[18]		
Roman Catholic	17.2%		
Muslim	13.8%	29.4%	21.4%
African Traditional religion	1.1% (max. 6.1%)[19]	10.6%	11.6%
Other religions	5.6%	1.4%	0.5%
Agnostic	2.1%	0.6%	0.5%

Table 3 Religions in Malawi and Sub-Saharan Africa

[9] When referring to Africa in this thesis, I mean 'Sub-Saharan Africa'.

[10] There are many differences in religious beliefs and practices between the African Sub-Saharan countries. For some scholars this is a reason to speak of plural 'ATRs', see e.g.: Musa W. Dube, 'Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives on African Religions', in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012). Kalilombe adds the disclaimer that 'African Traditional Religion' is not a monolithic entity, but it exists in many local variations': Patrick A. Kalilombe, *Doing Theology at the Grassroots: Theological Essays from Malawi*, Reprint (Malawi: Luviri Press, 1999), 223. I use the singular, while keeping Kalilombe's warning in mind.

[11] The 20/40 window of Africa comprises the Arab World, the Horn of Africa and the upper part of Sub-Saharan Africa.

[12] In 1910, this was only 9.1% - Pew Forum, 'Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population', 19 December 2011, 15, http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2011/12/Christianity-fullreport-web.pdf.

[13] Patrick Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church: History, Trends and Possibilities* (IVP Books, 2011), 174–75; Pew Forum, 'Global Christianity', 9.53f.

[14] The Indexmundi website states: Christian 77.4%; Muslim 13.8%; Traditionalists 1.1%; other and non-religious together 7.7% – https://www.indexmundi.com/malawi/demographics_profile.html (accessed 27-07-2022)

[15] According to: Gina A. Zurlo, 'A Demographic Profile of Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa', in *Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Kenneth R. Ross, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, and Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 24f.

[16] See Ibid., 34.

[17] This includes: Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) 14.2%, Seventh Day Adventist/Baptist 9.4%, Pentecostal 7.6%, Anglican 2.3%. Further: Roman Catholic 17.2%, other Christian 26.6%, Muslim 13.8%, ATR 1.1%, other 5.6%, none 2.1% (2018 est.). Data according to: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/malawi/ (accessed 01/02/2021).

[18] This includes the African Initiated Churches, which form 12% of the population.

[19] The percentage of 1.1% seems to be very low, but is found in several sources (see above). See also: https://www.britannica.com/place/Malawi/People , which has a different division, but also has a very low estimate of ATR: 1.3%. Isabel Phiri indicates that the number of ATR practitioners is not acknowledged: Isabel Apawo Phiri et al. (eds), *Anthology of African Christianity*, Regnum Studies in Global Christianity (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2016), 634. Her estimate is 6.1%.

John Mbiti famously stated that 'Africans are notoriously religious' and that religion can be found in every aspect of African life.[20] Mbiti's opinion is sometimes relativised as being mainly a reaction to the Western ideas about the 'barbaric' spiritual state of 'the Africans' before the arrival of Christianity.[21] In a sense, secularization is also taking place in many African countries,[22] but statistics show that, fifty years after most Sub-Saharan African countries became independent, religion remained very influential in African societies.[23]

4.2. The Religious Context of Central Malawi

In this paragraph, I will provide a short characteristic of two of the most important religious groups in the context of the research: African and Chewa traditional religiosity and the Evangelical Pentecostal churches. I am aware of the fact that the Roman Catholic church (17.2%) and Islam (13.8%) are also religious factors in Malawian society, but there was no reference made to either of these in the interviews or the other conversations.

4.2.1. African and Chewa Traditional Religion[24]

ATR was the religious thinking the Reformed missionaries who came to Malawi encountered and it is present today. According to the 2018 census, less than 200,000 Malawians self-identify as religiously 'traditional' (1.1% of the population), but the influence of ATR and Chewa Traditional Religion is much larger than this number suggests because an unknown number of members of Malawian mainstream churches still participate in traditional religious practices and adhere to the underlying beliefs and share the ATR worldview.[25] Due to secularization, modernization and conversion to Christianity or Islam, ATR practices are waning in many places, but there are also strong nationalist organizations trying to reinvigorate the traditional African cultural heritage, including traditional religion. This is also true for Chewa Traditional Religion in Central Malawi. For example, local Nyau funeral rituals are common practice and villagers are often expected to participate in them, because it is believed that failing to do so would harm the community.[26]

It is not easy to define ATR, among others, because many African languages do not have a word for 'religion'. The Malawian Roman Catholic theologian Patrick Kalilombe wrote: 'African religion is essentially a way of living in the visible sphere in relation with the invisible world. This relationship pervades the whole of life, of individuals as well as of the community — or rather, of individuals in

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[20] John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, England; Portsmouth, USA: Heinemann, 2015), 29. See also: Benno van den Toren and Joseph Bosco Bangura, 'Introduction. Can God Die in Africa?', *Is Africa Incurably Religious?*, eds Benno van den Toren, Joseph Bosco Bangura, and Richard E. Seed (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2020).

[21] See Olusegun Oladipo, 'Religion in African Culture: Some Conceptual Issues', in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 355–63; Frans `, 'Are Africans Incurably Religious? Discourse Analysis of a Debate, Direction of a Discipline', *Exchange* 46, no. 4 (2017): 370–97.

[22] See for a multi-faceted treatment of this topic: Benno van den Toren, Joseph Bosco Bangura, and Richard E. Seed (eds), *Is Africa Incurably Religious?* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2020).

[23] Pew Research Forum on Religion & Public Life, 'Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa' (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 15 April 2010), 3, http://www.pewforum.org/2010/04/15/executive-summary-islam-and-christianity-in-sub-saharan-africa/.

[24] I sketch some main lines of ATR here, which are also relevant for the understanding of the Central-Malawian context. In the reflections below (§ 4.5.2.1 and § 4.5.4) I will pay attention to more specific elements from Chewa Traditional Religion.

[25] This was clear from the interviews: F-38:1; teacher; 30+ / F-44:1; pastor; 30+ / F-46:3; pastor; 40+ / F-47:12; pastor; 30+ / F-48:6-7; teacher; 40+ / FN-150:3.

[26] J. van Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion*, 2nd rev. ed. (Blantyre, Malawi: Kachere Series, 2001), 125f; Michael Immanuel Ndau, 'A Study on the Church as God's Family in Relation to the Chewa Traditional Practice of Nyau in Central Malawi' (Master Thesis, Kwazulu-Natal, 2015), https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/14201/Ndau_Michael_Emmanuel_2015.pdf.

the community.'[27] According to the South African theologian Mashau, ATR can be briefly characterized as 'a belief in a transcendent God, a spiritual world, ancestral spirits, a hierarchy of powers, the notion of cosmic good and African communality, and the use of spiritual powers for good or bad.'[28] It is based on oral tradition and draws on divine and spiritual presence in nature and ancestral wisdom. There are no codifying writings, no doctrinal standards, no fixed institutions or clearly defined practices.[29] The spiritual guidance of the diviners is sought by the people, to know the Supreme Being's will and to avoid 'doing the wrong thing'.[30] John Mbiti writes that the diviners detect 'the cause of the sickness, find who the criminal is, or diagnose the nature of the disease, apply the right treatment and supply the means of preventing the misfortune from occurring again.'[31] The South African theologian Maimela speaks of a 'split-personality of the African soul': Christianity is good for providing salvation for the life hereafter, while ATR provides for the good life on earth.[32]

In Malawi witchhunt was forbidden by law (Witchcraft Ordinance 1911), but it turned out to be very difficult to stop witchcraft accusations and ritually 'neutralizing' witchcraft.[33] Christians who continued to practise witchcraft or visited witches or witch doctors were faced with church discipline, and this is still true in the CCAP Nkhoma today.[34] However, the ATR worldview has deep roots, remaining vibrant and displaying adaptability in the changing Malawian context, also among Christians.[35] Western missionaries often ignored the importance of traditional religion for the local population and interpreted its traditional worldview as a primitive mindset and mere superstition, which could be solved by bringing education, medicine and technology as a preparation for the Gospel.[36] The Malawian theologian Chakanza states: 'Most Malawian Christians have retained such traditional legacies as ancestor cult, polygynous practices, and belief in sorcery and witchcraft as the explanation of disease, death, and calamity.'[37]

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[27] Kalilombe, *Doing Theology at the Grassroots*, 220; See also: John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford; Portsmouth, N.H: Heinemann, 1990), 151.

[28] T. Derrick Mashau, 'A Reformed Missional Perspective on Secularism and Pluralism in Africa: Their Impact on African Christianity and the Revival of Traditional Religion', *Calvin Theological Journal* 44, no. 1 (April 2009): 117. Yusufu Turaki, *Christianity and African Gods: A Method in Theology* (Potchefstroom, SA: Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir CHO, 1999), 69.

[29] Matthew Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions* (Wipf & Stock, 2013), 43; Handwell Yotamu Hara, *Reformed Soteriology and the Malawian Context* (Zomba, Malawi: Kachere Series, 2000), 135f.

[30] Anderson, *Spirit-Filled World*, 115.

[31] Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 165; Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions*, 43; Hara, *Reformed Soteriology and the Malawian Context*, 135f.

[32] S.S. Maimela, 'Salvation in African Traditional Religions', *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 13, no. 2 (1 August 1985): 71. See also: Mashau, 'A Reformed Missional Perspective', 119f.

[33] Fields, Karen E. 'Christian Missionaries as Anticolonial Militants'. *Theory and Society* 11, no. 1 (1982): 95–108.

[34] Timothy Kabulunga Nyasulu, 'Witchcraft Accusation and Church Discipline in Malawi', *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 4, no. 1 (2020): 125. In an interview, the Nkhoma Synod president recently stated that participation in local Nyau rituals is met with church discipline: https://www.mwnation.com/can-nyau-live-side-by-side-with-islam-christianity/ (Accessed 01-02-2021).

[35] Amon Eddie Kasambala, 'The Impact of an African Spirituality and Cosmology on God-Images in Africa: A Challenge to Practical Theology and Pastoral Ministry', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9, no. 2 (2005): 300–323.

[36] See the report of the early missionary James W. Jack, *Daybreak in Livingstonia. The Story of the Livingstonia Mission. British Central Africa*, Revised and with an Introduction by Robert Laws (New York: Young People's Missionary Movement, 1900), 156.

[37] J.C. Chakanza, 'Malawi', *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices: 4 Volume Set*, ed. Thomas Riggs, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (Farmington Hills, Mich: Gale Research Inc, 2014), 21.

In short: African and Chewa Traditional Religion continues to exist in Malawi, not as some monolithic or pure heritage from the past, but in the hybrid religious situation of post-colonial Africa.[38]

4.2.2. Neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches

The second important religious context for the CCAP, as also mentioned in the interviews, is the neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, with an estimated 1.3 million members. Pentecostals are present in urban and rural areas, while charismatic influence, often in the form of the Prosperity Gospel, is found mostly in the cities.[39]

The Pentecostal-Charismatic movement reached Malawi in the 1930s mostly through Malawians who had worked abroad and started native-controlled missions, although there were also foreign missionaries, for example, from South Africa and West Africa.[40] The Pentecostal and Charismatic churches share the ATR perception of the spirit world, offering a Christian worldview in its stead, in which the spirits and ancestors are equalled to the Biblical demonic powers, which need to be opposed. The liberating force of the Holy Spirit is often presented as a Gospel of prosperity, a remedy for the pressing problems of poverty and illness, but also as a panacea against spirit possession and witchcraft, in short: as a rebuttal of ATR.[41]

The early Presbyterian missionaries were opposed to the use of local Malawian elements in worship services, and prohibited dancing, clapping and drums, instead importing classical Western hymns and urging people to stand still in church.[42] However, the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches use not only a contemporary Western worship style with guitars and international praise music but also include African forms of dancing, drums and an abundant style of praying and singing. The Pentecostal-Charismatic churches also use social media and television effectively to promote their theology and worship style. In this way, they are not only connecting to the contemporary global church but also locally relevant, which makes the churches attractive to younger and higher educated Malawians.[43]

4.3. The Birth of the CCAP Nkhoma — Some Historical Notes[44]

Isabel Phiri states: 'Being Reformed in Africa means to acknowledge that we have a heritage of missionary enterprise and to continue to nurture missionary connections'.[45] The expeditions of the

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[38] Benson O. Igboin, 'Colonialism and African Cultural Values', *African Journal of History and Culture* 3, no. 6 (2011): 96–103. See also: Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 38; Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 3rd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 135f.

[39] For a characterization of African Pentecostalism see J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Signs, Tokens, and Points of Contact: Religious Symbolism and Sacramentality in Non-Western Christianity', *Studia Liturgica* 48, no. 1–2 (2018): 127–46.

[40] Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (OUP USA, 2008), 60f; Klaus Fiedler, *Conflicted Power in Malawian Christianity. Essays Missionary and Evangelical from Malawi* (Mzuzu, Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2015), 321–48.

[41] See for a discussion of the question of (dis)continuity with ATR and Pentecostalism also: Anderson, *Spirit-Filled World*, 4f.

[42] FN-59:25. See also: Walter Lawrence Brown, 'The Development in Self-Understanding of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod as Church during the First Forty Years of Autonomy: An Ecclesiological Study' (D.Th., University of Stellenbosch, 2005), 293.

[43] Rhodian G. Munyenyembe, *Christianity and Socio-Cultural Issues: The Charismatic Movement and Contextualization of the Gospel in Malawi* (African Books Collective, 2011), 73f.

[44] The history of the CCAP Nkhoma has been authoritatively described by Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*; Munyenyembe, *History of the CCAP*. See also: Steven Paas, *Christianity in Eurafrica: A History of the Church in Europe and Africa* (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2017), ch. 57; Kenneth R. Ross and Klaus Fiedler, *A Malawi Church History 1860 - 2020* (Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2020).

[45] Isabel Apawo Phiri, 'Reformed Theology in Africa', in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology*, ed. Paul T. Nimmo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 287.

famous Scottish explorer-missionary David Livingstone (1813–1873) in what is called Malawi today formed the incentive for British mission and colonial involvement in this region. However, missionaries not only preached the Gospel, but also took up the 'white man's burden': building mission schools and hospitals in an attempt to empower the local people.[46]

The CCAP Nkhoma, to which our respondents belong, has its roots in the mission work of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC — *Nederduits Hervormde Kerk in Suid Afrika*) of the Cape Colony. The first DRC missionary was Andrew Charles Murray (1862–1936),[47] who arrived in 1888.[48] The Free Church of Scotland's 'Livingstonia Mission' was already active in North Malawi and the Established Church of Scotland, the 'Blantyre Mission', was working in the South, therefore the DRC missionaries moved to the Central region.[49] Like the Scottish missionaries, the DRC missionaries used the mission stations as a successful missionary strategy to evangelise and train indigenous school teachers and evangelists to teach industrial and agricultural skills and to provide domestic education for girls, partly through boarding schools.[50] Schools with local teachers became the 'seedbeds of the church' in the villages.[51] In 1910, there were about 190 mission schools with more than 20,000 children in Central Malawi.[52]

In 1913, the DRC mission moved its headquarters from Mvera to the Nkhoma mission station, hence the name 'Nkhoma Synod'. By that time, the number of Malawian evangelists was around 2000, while some 60,000 people in 200 villages attended the worship services.[53] The success of the Gospel preaching was mainly due to the service of local evangelists. In 1924, Livingstonia and Blantyre together formed the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), with the DRC ('the Dutch') also joining in 1926.[54] 12 June 1962, when the strive for independence in Malawian society had already become strong, the CCAP Nkhoma gained its independence from the DRC churches.

Currently, the CCAP Nkhoma totals up to approximately 1.2 million members (communicants and catechumens) spread out over about 200 particularized churches.[55] Most churches are in rural areas and have a central church with up to fifty prayer houses in the connected surrounding villages, with 50-100 members each. There are some 240 pastors, but some are very old and some have administrative functions in the denomination.[56] When a pastor visits a prayer house, multiple church services are held in which the sacraments are administered, the ordination of office bearers takes

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[46] Munyenyembe, *History of the CCAP*, 54f. In 1915 the number of mission schools was: Livingstonia 514, Blantyre 239 and DRCM 610 schools. McCracken, *A History of Malawi*, 115. Most political leaders before and after Malawi's independence graduated from a mission school: J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa', in *Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Kenneth R. Ross, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, and Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 51.

[47] Janet W. Parsons, 'Scots and Afrikaners in Central Africa: Andrew Charles Murray and the Dutch Reformed Church Mission in Malawi', *The Society of Malawi Journal* 51, no. 1 (1998): 22.

[48] Munyenyembe, *History of the CCAP*, 92.

[49] Klaus Fiedler comments critically on this 'mission comity', as preaching the faith became a geographic monopoly of missions: Fiedler, *Conflicted Power in Malawian Christianity. Essays Missionary and Evangelical from Malawi*, 83f; 182f.

[50] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*, 261.

[51] Ibid., 154f; 220f.

[52] Isaac C. Lamba, 'The Cape Dutch Reformed Church Mission in Malawi: A Preliminary Historical Examination of Its Educational Philosophy and Application, 1889-1931', *History of Education Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1984): 380f.

[53] Paas, *Christianity in Eurafrica*, 459.

[54] Munyenyembe, *History of the CCAP*, 98; Humphreys F. Zgambo, 'An Inquiry into Ethnicity in the Structures of the Church: The Case of Malawi', *Open Science Journal* 2, no. 3 (25 August 2017): 14f, doi:10.23954/osj.v2i3.1105.

[55] FN-150:5. However, Msangaambe mentions the number of 144 churches in 2010: Msangaambe, 'Lay Empowerment', 53.

[56] FN-150:5. The structure of a mother church with mission stations was already set up by the missionaries.

place, the clothes of women's guild members are blessed, etc. The church elders are the daily leaders in the prayer houses and have the charge of preaching and teaching.[57]
The Malawian church historian and teacher Munyenyembe traces the spiritual roots of the CCAP Nkhoma back to a variety of elements: Scottish Presbyterianism, the influence of Dutch Reformed theology through the DRC churches in South Africa, the European and American revivals and finally to John Calvin's Geneva. In this way, he anchors the origins of the church geographically and historically in the European Reformed-Presbyterian tradition and the Reformation.[58] This identity narrative illustrates how many of the interviewed Reformed pastors and teachers in the CCAP Nkhoma position their church in the worldwide Reformed family.

4.4. Description and Analysis of the Empirical Research

Having described the emergence of the CCAP Nkhoma in its religious context, I now turn to the explanation of how the empirical research on infant baptism was conducted, subsequently describing the findings for the four aspects of infant baptism which I discern in this research — believing, belonging, behaving and experiencing, also showing differences and making comparisons between the 'four voices of theology', as introduced in chapter two. Finally, I wish to compare and systematize the findings and formulate the baptismal narrative(s) of the CCAP interviewees.
The research was conducted during two visits to Malawi in February and July 2018. Each visit included personal conversations, interviews, and visits to local churches where I also attended worship services. There was a fruitful interaction with teachers and students of the Josophat Mwale Theological Institute and the faculty for Education and Health Sciences of Nkhoma University in Nkhoma. Most of the information was collected through interviews with pastors, theology teachers and church members. In the context of this project, I also had the opportunity of participating in a CCAP baptismal service in Lilongwe, a suburb of the capital.

4.4.1. First Visit (10—24 February 2018)

The purpose of the first visit was an orientation on the social-religious context of the respondents in Central Malawi and to understand how the local CCAP Nkhoma churches function, in particular how infant baptism is practised.[59] During this visit, I also started to map the normative and formal voices of theology concerning both the theology and practice of infant baptism by collecting documents and interviewing CCAP Nkhoma theology teachers and pastors. Most interviews with pastors were conducted at their parsonage, while most teachers were interviewed at the Seminary.

4.4.2. Second Visit (15—24 July 2018)

The main purpose of the second visit was to conduct individual interviews and a group interview with church members to be able to understand the actual practice of infant baptism in the CCAP and to map the voice of 'espoused theology' in the CCAP-Nkhoma.
The meetings were arranged by the local gatekeepers, who asked local pastors to invite church members for individual and group interviews. I visited two rural congregations, one urban church and one semi-urban congregation (on the outskirt of a city), as well as a CCAP Church plant in a suburb of Lilongwe. The interviews were typically conducted in the church building or the local Seminary.
During the second visit, two group interviews were conducted, in which a more in-depth discussion of the main themes of the individual interviews was possible. The first group interview was with six participants (three mothers and three fathers). The second meeting was attended by two mothers

[57] They receive basic theological training through the Veritas programme: https://www.veritascollege.org. FN-59:14. See also: Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*, 204.
[58] Munyenyembe, *History of the CCAP*, viii; 11f.; 252f.; 279.
[59] The contrast between the minority churches in North India and the mainstream church in Malawi is important for the conversation between the contexts.

and two fathers. In general, people responded easily on the aspects of belief, belonging and behaviour, but, as in the individual interviews, it proved more difficult to speak about experiences and emotions.[60]
Many interviewees later indicated that they were glad to have participated in the research and that the questions made them reflect on their faith and how the church practises infant baptism. Several respondents expressed surprise at a white researcher being interested in their faith and opinion, as one respondent expressed: *'That the faith that we had, we thought maybe that was useless, but we've seen it is important in the face of God'* (E-147:5).[61] In this sense, participation in the research became a form of empowerment for interviewees.
On several occasions, I reflected on the interviews with teachers and gatekeepers. Professor Benno van den Toren participated in the research as an observer on some days and, later on, Thandi Soko-de Jong, a Malawian fellow researcher at the PThU arrived in Malawi. Together we discussed the interviews and observations which had taken place up until that moment. This reflection was included in my field notes and helped me to interpret certain observations better and to fine-tune some of the interview questions for congregation members.

4.4.3. Research Population

The Malawian respondents were selected with the help of the local gatekeepers. They are members of the CCAP-Nkhoma, from both rural and urban congregations, pastors, teachers and congregation members. In the research, I did not find significant differences between villagers and urban interviewees concerning the understanding of infant baptism or, for example, ATR ideas about witchcraft. An important reason may be the fact that most young people who move to the cities regularly return to their families in the villages, remaining in the same socio-religious circle.[62]
The theology teachers and pastors, the main informants for the normative and formal theological voices, were not difficult to find. A total of seven pastors and four theology teachers were interviewed, and I talked to three of them more than once to reflect on the interviews. Many informal conversations with pastors, teachers and members of the CCAP Synod also occurred. Most of the interviewed pastors are 40+, and some are 30+. Typically, pastors start their careers as a teacher and move on to pastoral training and practice later.[63]
Finding respondents for the mapping of espoused theology was more of a challenge: in the villages, some people are shy, while in the cities people are very busy. Most interviews were done individually, but three interviews were conducted with couples, due to personal reasons of the interviewees.
Some of the interviewed mothers work at home and sell products at a local market, others had finished higher education and worked as primary school teachers, nurses or in small private businesses. Many fathers work at the market, own small shops or work in agriculture. While most pastors and teachers have their family roots in the CCAP, the church members I interviewed came partly from families with mixed ecclesiological affiliations (Assemblies of God, neo-Pentecostal, Roman Catholic or Muslim). Several of the respondents grew up in a Christian family from another denomination and joined the CCAP as adults. This change in denomination is often for practical reasons, such as marriage to a CCAP member, or because the CCAP church is close to the place where they live.[64] Several respondents come from families who adhere to African Traditional Religion.[65] The variety in the theological and religious backgrounds of the respondents reflects the character of the CCAP Nkhoma as a '*Volkskirche*', which seeks to embrace families and communities.

[60] FN-59:34
[61] See also E-55:7; father; 30+ and E-67:3; mother; 40+.
[62] Munyenyembe, *Christianity and Socio-Cultural Issues*, 75.
[63] FN-150:8
[64] F-38; teacher; 30+; E-57; father; 40+; E-66; mother; 40+; E-148; mother; 20+.
[65] E-47; mother; 20+.

It also shows that, because of the socio-economic circumstances, there is a lot of 'border traffic' between denominations.

Background / Age	Leaders	Ord. Believer Female	Ord. Believer Male	Total
CCAP	9	8	6	23
Protestant / Evangelical	1	2	3	6
RCC		1		1
ATR / mixed	1	3	3	7
20+		8	5	13
30+	3	3	4	10
40+	8	3	3	14

Table 4 Overview Respondents CCAP Nkhoma Malawi

4.4.4. Research Language

There are at least ten different ethnic groups in Malawi, all having one of the Bantu languages as their mother tongue. The largest ethnic group is formed by the Chewa people, who speak Chichewa, which was the official national language from 1964 to 1994.[66] Since 1996, the medium of instruction at schools is English from grade five on, with a minority of the population, therefore, being fluent in English, especially in the cities. The interviews with teachers and pastors during the first visit were conducted in English. During the second visit, the interviews with church members were partly done in English and partly in Chichewa, with the help of a translator. The group interviews were conducted in English, with occasional translation.[67]

4.5. Appropriation of Infant Baptism in CCAP-Nkhoma

In Malawi, infant baptism was introduced by the early missionaries.[68] The first children of Christian parents were baptized by DRC missionaries in 1898.[69] In this period, the practice of Christian baptism also involved receiving a (new) Christian name.[70] In this early period, baptism was not easily administered but was for 'achievers' (Fiedler): adult converts had to follow intensive daily baptismal classes for several years[71] and parents who wanted their children to be baptized had to be 'in good standing'.[72] The early missionary, A.C. Murray, describes how he explained infant baptism as a 'sign of ownership': like a slave who receives an earmark from the owner — baptism is a seal which shows that God owns the child. Parents must first be instructed in the faith, be baptized and promise to

[66] Chewa's form 34.3% of the population. Some other ethnical groups are Lomwe, Yao, Ngoni and Tumbuka. See https://www.indexmundi.com/malawi/demographics_profile.html (accessed 10/09/2020) and https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/malawi/ (accessed 01/02/2021)
[67] FN-59:28.
[68] Andrew C. Murray, *Nyasaland en mijne ondervindingen aldaar* (Amsterdam; Kaapstad: Hollands-Afrikaansche uitgevers-maatschappij, 1897), 281f.
[69] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*, 70.
[70] Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 2014, 8. See also: Murray, *Nyasaland*, 287.
[71] Before entering 'baptismal class', people first attended the 'hearer's class' ('*hoorderklas*'), because the participants were illiterate. Only those who could read the translated New Testament were admitted to the baptismal class: Murray, *Nyasaland*, 281f.
[72] Fiedler, *Conflicted Power in Malawian Christianity. Essays Missionary and Evangelical from Malawi*, 77f. See also: Vlok, 35f.

bring up their children in the Christian faith. Only then can then they bring their children for baptism.[73]

The CCAP Nkhoma shares its 'normative theology' with the other CCAP synods: the Apostles' Creed, the 'Brief statement of Faith' (1924)[74] as well as a 'distinct acknowledgement of the Word of God as the supreme rule of faith and conduct'. In line with the founding DRC churches, the pastors subscribe to the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt. While the Presbyterian missionaries of Livingstonia and Blantyre Synods translated the Westminster Standards for their church members, Andrew C. Murray published a 'confession' in 1892, which was a translation of the Dutch '*Kort Begrip*' (which is based on the Heidelberg Catechism) and some parts from the Westminster Shorter Catechism.[75] A translation of the Heidelberg Catechism in Chewa was published only in 2002.[76]

About infant baptism, the 'Brief Statement of Faith' cites the Westminster Shorter Catechism: '*Baptism is a Sacrament wherein the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of Grace and our engagement to be the Lord's.*'[77]

For the baptismal services, liturgical forms are used which are (shortened) translations of the DRC forms, which again draw heavily on classical Dutch baptismal forms.[78] The CCAP Book of Church order mentions, as Biblical warrant for infant baptism, Jesus' ordination of baptism (Mt. 28 and Mk 16), the covenant with Abraham and circumcision, Peter's declaration that 'the promise is for you and your children' in Acts 2:39, as well as Jesus allowing the children to come to Him.[79] These texts were also mentioned by the pastors and teachers.

The parents' references to the Bible were almost exclusively the story that Jesus blesses the children.[80] One father referred to Peter's sermon at Pentecost. The same father also mentioned that Paul said we are baptized in Christ, died and were resurrected with him.[81] Finally, a father pointed to the parallel between baptism and Jesus' death and resurrection.[82]

Several pastors and teachers indicate that there is insufficient explanation of infant baptism.[83] From a practical point of view, this is understandable as there are only 240 pastors for roughly 1.2 million church members. As a result, most of the instruction and preaching in the church is done by lay preachers (elders) with limited theological training.

In the following sections, I will describe the appropriation of infant baptism in CCAP-Nkhoma, mainly based on the interviews and field notes. After the description of each aspect of appropriation ('believing-belonging-behaving-experiencing'), I shall reflect on the relation to the Malawian context.

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[73] Murray, *Nyasaland*, 283.

[74] The text can be found, e.g. in: Pauw, 'Mission and Church in Malawi', 270. It contains many elements of the Apostles' Creed and subsequently points out the duties of church members.

[75] Ibid., 327. Murray, *Nyasaland*, 282; W.S.D. Zeze, 'The Heidelberg Catechism: A Hidden Creedal Text and Catechetical Manual in the Malawian Reformed Church 1889-2012', *Acta Theologica*, 2014, 252.

[76] Steven Paas, ed., *Katekisma Wa Heidelberg. Heidelberg Catechism. Zacharias Ursinus Ndi Caspar Olevianus Chisindikizo Choyamba Cha Bukuli Chinachitika Ku Heidelberg, m'chaka Cha 1563*, Bi-lingual Edition (Zomba, Malawi: Kachere Series, 2002).

[77] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*, 270–71.

[78] D. 36 – CCAP Nkhoma – Book of Church Order. See also: Ibid., 327.

[79] Book of Church Order, D. 36

[80] F-43; teacher; 30+ / E-50:9; mother; 20+ / E-53:2 / father; 30+ etc.

[81] E-52:13; father; 20+

[82] E-57:9; father; 40+

[83] F-38:34; teacher; 30+ / E-49:17; mother; 20+ / E-50:13; parents; 20+ / F-45:9; pastor; 40+

4.5.1. 'Believing'

In this paragraph, I discuss 'believing' as an aspect of the appropriation of infant baptism. Questions brought forward are: What does the baptismal water refer to? Is there an 'effect' of infant baptism on parents and children? Is there a relationship between infant baptism and salvation? I also discern the voices of normative, formal and espoused theology.

4.5.1.1. Children of a 'High' God

'I believe that the child may receive a treasure of grace through the faith of the parents — but I am not sure how God will work. But I believe that God's grace may flow to the child. When we believe God is there, no matter what we are going through, God is really good, He is our everything.' (E-51:17; father; 20+).

Infant baptism brings a child into a relationship with God — this was the shared opinion of all interviewees. God is typically seen as a 'high' God: benevolent, but there is no 'intimate' relationship. God is addressed as '*Mulungu*', the Almighty, the Supreme Being. Affective expressions, such as 'God's love' for his children or that believers 'love God', or a 'relationship' with God or Christ are hardly used, neither by pastors nor by congregation members.[84]

God's active omnipresence is affirmed by all interviewees,[85] but the question of whether God is personally present or acting in infant baptism is answered differently. Most pastors and teachers express that God acts in baptism: God instituted baptism, therefore He must also be involved in it.[86] Baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, also indicates God's action.[87]

A pastor states that parents expect that once they have their child baptized, God will take care: '*God is putting a seal on them: you are really my child and parents really expect that.'* (F-47:8; pastor; 30+)[88] Parents express a genuine trust in God's goodness, His help and care for their children because they invoke God's name in baptism.[89]

They bring their child to God, which is the beginning of life with God and which places the child on the way to heaven.[90] Through infant baptism, God keeps the child from doing sin.[91] Pastors and teachers refer to the children as a 'child of God' and a 'gift of God', but neither pastors nor congregation members address God as 'Father'. If parents use the expression 'child of God', they do not point to a loving relationship with God but to the responsibility of the parents to care for a Christian upbringing of their child and the requirement to live obediently and according to God's law: '*In infant baptism, God gives the parents a responsibility to look after the children as children of God; they are given a commitment; God entrusted the children to them — this is serious, it is not just a common thing or a tradition. It is a commitment: the parents are responsible both physically and spiritually to take care of the children.'* (F-48:8; teacher; 40+)[92]

A personal observation is that pastors and teachers speak regularly about 'Jesus' or 'Christ' or 'Jesus Christ', such as: 'I accepted Christ as my Saviour' or 'Jesus told us…' Some pastors also speak about a

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[84] Sometimes by pastors in a general way, for example: F-40:3; pastor; 40+. Church members use it even less. By exception a mother, talking about her conversion, says: '*So we are taught the love of God and other things and then people, we are, we are brought to repentance.*' (E-60:14; mother; 20+)

[85] E-65:2; mother; 30+

[86] F-45:8; pastor; 40+ / F-46:9; pastor; 40+ / F-47:8; pastor; 30+

[87] F-46:9; pastor; 40+ / E-61:1; mother; 20+ / E-68:5; mother; 30+

[88] This is the only time a respondent used the term 'seal' in relation to baptism.

[89] E-51:17; father; 20+; E-52:7; father; 20+ / Gr-151:1

[90] E-50:14; father; 20+ / E-51:13; father; 20+ / E-52.9; father; 20+

[91] E-55:3; father; 30+ / E-56:6; father; 30+ / E-57:9; father; 30+ / E-58:6; father; 40+ / E-66:8; mother; 30+ / E-70:1; father; 20+

[92] Also: F-43:6; teacher; 30+. E-63:5; mother; 20+: 'baptism brings the child close to God. It will be obedient to parents and God.'

'personal relationship with Christ', or 'devote oneself to Christ'.[93] Congregation members speak sometimes about 'Jesus' in a general way: 'Jesus said' or 'Jesus was also baptized'. However, speaking about 'Jesus' in a more personal or intimate way happens only sometimes in the interviews (for example, 'joy that I received Jesus', 'I really see who Jesus is').[94]

4.5.1.2. Forgiveness and Salvation?

'When we take a child for infant baptism, it is asked from parents if they recognize that this child was born in sin. Now when it's given for…, for baptism, when the child is baptized, then that child is forgiven of his sins. Yeah. By God. So, he is accepted by God.' (G-151:5)

Except for one, all interviewed pastors and teachers believe that little children are born in sin.[95] Many ordinary believers agree with that, but several parents believe that little children are without guilt.[96] The sin of Adam (and Eve) is mentioned as the cause of the fallen condition.[97] Infant baptism is seen as a sign of cleansing or 'washing of sin' by most pastors and teachers but only sporadically by the church members.[98] Even though many parents believe that children receive forgiveness, this is mostly not related to the 'performative' act of baptism, but to the fact that they 'give the child in God's hands' in baptism, an expression which was often used by the parents. For the parents, infant baptism is a sign that the child is protected and 'in God's hands'.[99] Some parents expressed other ideas. One mother was moved during the interview when she said that God has forgiven the sins of her child in baptism.[100] A father stated that the child is reborn in baptism, because of the faith of the parents, while another father stated that baptism always gives rebirth, even independent of the faith of the parents.[101]

Several pastors and teachers stress that infant baptism does not imply the salvation of a child.[102] On the other hand, they sometimes use strong expressions and explain the meaning of baptism as 'saving a child from a burning house'.[103] Some mothers believe that infant baptism means the salvation of their child,[104] but for most ordinary believers it is clear that this is not what baptism offers.[105]

Pastors and parents mention that the faith of the parents is essential for the salvation of little children who die early because these children are included in the parents.[106] Yet, the opposite is also true: '*If the parents are sinful, then the child born of sinful parents will be sinful. If parents are believers, then the child will be a believer, it is not born sinful.'* (E-58:2; father; 40+).[107]

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[93] F-38:23; teacher; 30+ / F-46:2; pastor; 40+ / F-47:4; pastor; 30+ / F-48:5; teacher; 40+

[94] E-51:1; mother; 20+ / E-52:19; father; 20+ / E-57:9.12; father; 40+ / E-62:5; mother; 20+

[95] F-41:10; teacher; 40+ / F-44:11; pastor; 30+

[96] Guilty, for example: E-51:14; mother; 20+ / E-55:6.11; father; 30+ / E:60:1; mother; 20+ / E-147:16; mother; 20+.
Innocent, for example: E-53:7; father; 30+ / E-56:5; father; 30+ / E-62:7; mother; 20+.

[97] F-38:10; teacher; 30+; F-39:19; pastor; 30+ / E-57:1.14; father; 40+; E-60:1.14; mother; 20+; E-151:16; group agrees.

[98] F-38:34; teacher; 30+ / F-44:11; pastor; 30+ / F-40:9.10; pastor; 40+ / E-66:3; mother; 40+

[99] E-51:17; father; 20+ / E-53:7; father; 30+ / E-57:17; father; 40+ E-62:2; mother; 20+ / E-63:2; mother; 20+ / E-68:3; mother; 30+ / G-151:9; mother; 30+

[100] G-151:9; mother; 20+

[101] E-69:8; father; 30+ (depending on faith parents) and G-147:13; father; 40+

[102] F-41:7; teacher; 40+ / F-48:13; teacher; 40+

[103] F-40:8; pastor; 40

[104] E-60:12; mother; 20+ / E-66;4; mother; 40+ / G-147:15; mother; 30+ / E-149:6; mother; 30+

[105] E-50:14; father; 20+ / E-51:13; father; 20+ / E-53:6; father; 30+ / E-56:6; father; 30+ / E-57:9; father; 40+ / E-63:2; mother; 20+ / E-67:4; mother; 40+ / E-70:11; father; 20+

[106] F-39:13; pastor; 30+ / F-44:13; pastor; 30+ / E-52:15; father; 20+ / E-148:3; mother; 30+

[107] E-50:14; mother; 20+ / E-51:13; mother; 20+ / E-65:2; mother; 30+ / E-69:2; father; 30+

Most pastors are very cautious to make explicit statements about the salvation of little children who died in infancy,[108] but some pastors claim that, if a child dies without having been baptized and not been 'put before the Lord', it will go to hell.[109]
Many church members are confident about God's goodness and the salvation of unbaptized children who die early. For some there remains a certain fear: if the child is not baptized and not brought up in a Christian way, God might punish the parents and the children; some think the child will not be saved.[110] For some parents there is a relationship between salvation and infant baptism: '*[by infant baptism] physically they get recognized as being part of the church. But then in the spiritual world, I believe they are also welcomed in the Kingdom of God. Because I believe when they're being baptized, God is there and the Holy Spirit is there witnessing. So, they also have their names written in the Book of Life. (…) It means salvation unto them'* (E-60:1.12; mother; 20+).[111]

4.5.1.3. Protection against Evil

'There are rumours in the villages that witches and wizards, they come at night to pick children and, to get them initiated in their so-called business. Now when a child is baptized child is protected. Maybe when the witches come, when the wizards come, they will…, they will hardly find this child. They will see maybe the place where the child is illuminated because of God's power… More like so shiny, the place is so shiny… Protection… That's God's power.' [G-147:3; father; 30+]'[112]

A more specific aspect of infant baptism that interviewees bring up is 'protection'. This was mentioned by some pastors and a teacher as they describe the beliefs of the people and the fact that people, especially in the villages, are still attached to ATR. For most parents, it seems to be 'a matter of fact'.[113]
In the first place, parents speak about baptism as protection in a broad sense: against illness, evil people, the devil, witchcraft and accidents.[114] A mother says during a group conversation: '*As believing families, we also believe that when our child is baptized, there is power from heaven. Holy Ghost fire that will protect this child. So, there is total protection'* (G-147:15; mother; 30+). The other parents present agree with her.
In the second place, protection is related to the devil or evil spirits. Nearly all parents believe that their children are born in sin, but 'sin' is often not understood as 'being guilty' before God, but as 'being in the hands of the devil'. Teachers and pastors say that also Christians today believe in ancestral spirits.[115] However, the church members I interviewed (from both rural and urban areas) hardly mention ancestors, whereas they did refer to the threat of evil spirits, demons, the devil or witches.[116] They see the child as a battleground between God and the evil forces or the devil and

[108] Also: F-39:14; pastor; 30+ / F-41:9
[109] F-42:12; pastor 40+ / F-40:16; pastor; 40+.
[110] E-53:7; father; 30+ / E-51:14; mother; 20+ / E-70:11; father; 20+ / G-151:6.8
[111] F-41:7; teacher; 40+ / E-149:6; mother; 30+
[112] The other participants in the group recognized and confirmed what was said. The idea that divine protection was experienced by Christians as a beam of light was also mentioned by an early missionary: Murray, *Nyasaland*, 288.
[113] F-43:15; pastor; 30+ / F-44:5.8; pastor; 30+ F-47:12; pastor; 30+ / F-48:9; teacher; 40+ and e.g. E-53:4.7; father; 30+ / E-60:11; mother; 20+ / E-68:1.2; mother; 30+ / E-69:1; father; 30+ / E-70:1; father; 20+
[114] F-43:15; teacher; 30+
[115] F-38:1.15.20; teacher; 30+ / F-42:1; pastor; 40+ / F-43:15; teacher; 30+ / F-48:7; teacher; 40+.
[116] It is possible that this fits into a broader pattern, in which, under influence of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement, the ancient ancestors are now identified devils, demons and witches, as the Ghanian theologian Asamoah-Gyadu indicates: 'The spirits of the ancestors and traditional deities have all survived in the African Christian imagination as demons that must be resisted, pure and simple.' J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Pulling down Strongholds: Evangelism, Principalities and Powers and the African Pentecostal Imagination', *International Review of Mission* 96, no. 382–383 (2007): 312–13.

feel the need to act on behalf of their child: '*If we leave him as he is, I do believe he will go to hell. Because the devil is capable of working with such little ones. So, if the devil is able to work with such little ones, it means God is also able to work with such little ones. So if we don't introduce them to God, they'll go to hell.'*(E-60:7.11; mother; 20+)[117] As long as a child is not baptized, it is not put in God's hands and thus it is in the hands of the devil.[118] The devil is seen as the first cause of sin: '*Christians don't do evil things, but when they do it, it is the influence of the devil*' (E-49:14; mother; 20+). The devil can bring temptation to the parents, for example, through the illness of a child.[119] When a child is baptized and the parents pray and stay close to God, the devil will be defeated.[120] Parents trust that through baptism God accepts and protects the child.
Finally, several ordinary believers relate infant baptism to protection against witches, while the pastors did not bring this up. One father says: '*If you don't take your children to God, the witches may take your child and be playing around with him and the child will not be okay. So, when you take your child to God, they are protected by the Holy Spirit.'* (E-53:4; father; 30+) He also mentions the story of Job, which shows that God controls and restrains the devil.
The difference between pastors and congregation members also becomes visible in the meaning attributed to the 'blood of Christ'. Pastors mention that the blood of Christ cleanses from sin.[121] In CCAP, the hymn 'There is power, wonder-working power, in the blood of the Lamb' is still popular and sung with great emotion.[122] Several parents, however, speak about the blood of Jesus, which protects against evil forces: '*The children cannot pray, someone has to pray on their behalf. Now once…, once they are baptised we think they are protected by the blood of Jesus (…) against evil spirits and witchcraft.*' (E-53:4; father; 30+)[123]

4.5.2. Reflections

Several aspects from ATR and Chewa Traditional Religion and neo-Pentecostalism can provide a context for the beliefs discussed. I pay special attention to the ideas of (1) a 'high' God, (2) protection against witchcraft and evil and finally I discuss 'infant baptism as an 'espoused answer' (3).

4.5.2.1. Reflection 1 — Children of a 'High God'

In ATR, the spiritual and the physical realm, the sacred and the profane, divinity and humanity merge into a single paradoxical worldview: 'God's transcendence and immanence, the human body and soul, matter and spirit are conceived not so much in their polarity as in their interconnectedness.'[124]
The Supreme Deity or Creator holds together the created order of natural elements, animals, spirits, and living and deceased humans.[125] The Malawian theologian Hara writes: 'There are many myths in Africa that state that God and the original human beings lived together in a family-like relationship,

[117] E-53:4; father; 30+ / E-61:1; mother; 20+ / E-68:1; mother; 30+
[118] E-53:7; father; 30+ / G-151:8
[119] F-39:7; pastor; 30+ / E-50:8; mother & father; 20+
[120] E-62:2; mother; 20+; E-66:1; mother; 40+ / E-68:3; mother; 30+: God will protect the child from illnesses as well. See also: G-147:6 and G-151:8.
[121] F-38:36; teacher; 30+ / F-40:9; pastor; 40+ / F:44:11; pastor; 30+
[122] This was reported to me by Dr Steven Paas (D-206 – Malawi S1). Also among Charismatic preachers today 'the blood of Jesus' is an important topic, see, for example: Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Pulling down Strongholds', 313; Derek Prince, *Applying the Blood: How to Release the Life and Power of Jesus' Sacrifice* (Destiny Image, 2020).
[123] E-60:7; mother; 20+ E-62:2; mother; 20+ / E-68:1; mother; 30+
[124] Amuluche-Greg Nnamani, 'The Flow of African Spirituality into World Christianity: A Case for Pneumatology and Migration', *Mission Studies* 32, no. 3 (15 October 2015): 332.
[125] Hara, *Reformed Soteriology and the Malawian Context*, 127; Eunice Karanja Kamaara, 'Cases and Controversies from Africa', in *Beyond the Borders of Baptism: Catholicity, Allegiances, and Lived Identities*, ed. Michael L. Budde, Ebook (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016), 98.

the former acting as a Father to the latter. He first lived on earth, but because of human transgression, he withdrew from the community with humans.' Also, the beginning of death is related to man's disobedience to God.[126] However, there are no myths that speak about any future cosmic restoration of the original harmony or the resurrection of humans.[127] After his departure, the Supreme Being is mostly seen by the Chewa as a distant and 'high god', who is 'acknowledged but not worshipped'.[128]

The early missionary, Andrew C. Murray, wrote that the locals called God '*Mulungu*', and the missionaries adopted this word for the Christian God.[129] However, '*Mulungu*' also has distinct connotations: *Mulungu* is gender-neutral and the Supreme Being is not seen as a Father or a God who comes close to humans.[130] The Supreme Being is not a '*Deus otiosus*', but involved in the 'macrocosm' of giving life and death, drought and rain. The daily quarrels and problems, the 'microcosm', are delegated to the ancestors.[131] Only questions that cannot be solved through the ancestors are brought to him as the 'ultimate arbiter'.[132] Kalilombe characterizes this 'porous' worldview with ancestors and spirits: 'the spirits render the transcendent immanent, but in such a way that the transcendent becomes "tamed", manageable and even negotiable'.[133] This results in an instrumental and anthropocentric 'religiosity', in which rituals and traditions are followed to obtain what is needed or desired ('*do ut des*').[134] John Mbiti writes: 'it would be incorrect to assert that the people experience a spiritual fellowship with God, which could approximate the Christian sense of worship. God is utilized, rather than 'worshipped'.[135]

There is no intimate relationship with the spirits of the ancestors or spirits: performing the traditional rites suffices for keeping the balance between the visible and spiritual world, avoiding the anger of the ancestors and receiving blessings in daily life.[136]

An interesting observation is that CCAP Nkhoma members do not address God as 'Father' (except for in the Lord's Prayer) but as '*Mulungu*'.[137] This was discussed with several Malawian informants, but, apart from ATR influence, no other explanations were mentioned. John Mbiti notes that, in ATR, kinship is essential but to 'extend the web of kinship to the Creator' is unheard of.[138]

It is important to notice that the lack of an affective relationship with God does not contradict the fact that God can be approached directly, without intermediates (such as ancestors or spirits) and it

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[126] Hara, *Reformed Soteriology and the Malawian Context*, 124.

[127] John S. Mbiti, 'Some Reflections on African Experience of Salvation Today', in *Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals: A Continuing Dialogue*, ed. Stanley J. Samartha (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1974), 113; Hara, *Reformed Soteriology and the Malawian Context*, 124.

[128] Julius Siwinda, 'The Holy Spirit, the Church and Daily Life. A Theological Search for an Integrated Pneumatology in the Light of Chewa Views of the Spirit' (Unpublished Master Thesis - University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, 2017), 2.19, http://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/102774; Hara, *Reformed Soteriology and the Malawian Context*, 123f.

[129] Murray, *Nyasaland*, 157.

[130] Hara, *Reformed Soteriology and the Malawian Context*, 123.

[131] Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Hippo Books, 2012), 69f; Hara, *Reformed Soteriology and the Malawian Context*, 124.

[132] Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion*, 38; Hara, *Reformed Soteriology and the Malawian Context*, 123f.

[133] Kalilombe, *Doing Theology at the Grassroots*, 235.

[134] Van den Toren, 'Christus Victor Motif'.

[135] John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 95.

[136] Hara, *Reformed Soteriology and the Malawian Context*, 129; See also: Anderson, *Spirit-Filled World*, 85; Eloi Messi-Metogo, 'Religious Indifference and Critique in Traditional Africa', in *Is Africa Incurably Religious?*, eds Benno van den Toren, Joseph Bosco Bangura, and Richard E. Seed, E-Book (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2020), ch. 2.

[137] F-59:5.

[138] Mbiti, *NT Eschatology*, 122.

also does not exclude the experience of God's presence, as we will show later. Through baptism, children come into a direct, though not intimate, relationship with God.[139]

4.5.2.2. Reflection 2 — Protection Against (D)evil

To Malawian Christians and traditionalists alike, the omnipresence of (good and evil) spiritual powers — and especially witchcraft — is a 'self-evident reality'.[140] In the context of poverty, high mortality rate, vulnerable agriculture and looming famine, people are afraid of spiritual powers which cause all kind of evil. In case of an accident, illness or bad crop, the most important question for many Malawians is not: 'what happened?', but: 'who caused this and why?' Parents fear that the devil, or witches with their 'evil' magic, might attack children and adults and will destroy the community, for example, by causing AIDS.[141] Traditional diviners and healers are 'helping' people to relate to the spirits, explain why certain problems occur, who (which person, witch or ancestor) was behind it and how it can be solved.[142] In periods of natural disasters or social tensions, witch-hunts erupt, through which people try to cleanse and protect the community, which thrives on superstition and (false) accusations, from evil forces.[143]

This 'spirit-filled' worldview of ATR is also shared by Christians.[144] In the past, Reformed-Presbyterian missionaries rejected beliefs about the spirit world as animism or mere superstition.[145] They urged people to burn their idols, but the underlying beliefs were not eradicated.[146] Because the Western Presbyterian missionaries failed to give a pastoral-theological answer to the ATR worldview, Christian converts thought that the Gospel is powerless in face of spiritual forces and continued to seek protection from diviners or witch hunters.[147]

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[139] Of course there are also exceptions: E-49:2; mother; 20+ / E-55:8; father; 30+: 'Because I feel so good when, so good and I feel so sweet when I hear the Word of God.'

[140] Caleb O. Oladipo, 'African Christianity. Its Scope in Global Context', in *Development, Modernism and Modernity in Africa*, ed. Augustine Agwuele (New York; London: Routledge, 2013), 214f; Bregje de Kok, *Christianity and African Traditional Religion: Two Realities of a Different Kind. A Cultural Psychological Study of the Way Christian Malawians Account for Their Involvement in African Traditional Religion*, Kachere Series (Zomba, Malawi, 2005), 62.

[141] E-53:4.5; father; 30+. Maimela, 'Salvation in African Traditional Religions', 68; J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Witchcraft Accusations and Christianity in Africa', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 39, no. 1 (2015): 23–27. I did not hear any reference to child witchcraft accusations. See also: Nyasulu, 'Witchcraft Accusation and Church Discipline in Malawi', 123.

[142] F-43:15; teacher; 30+. The early missionary A.C. Murray talks about a magician who is positive about the Christian Gospel, but also communicates with spirits – but 'only good spirits': Murray, *Nyasaland*, 135.

[143] David J. Bosch, 'The Problem of Evil in Africa. A Survey of African Views on Witchcraft and of the Response of the Christian Church', in *Like a Roaring Lion... Essays on the Bible, the Church and Demonic Powers*, ed. Pieter G.R. De Villiers (Pretoria - South Africa: C.B. Powell Bible Centre, 1987), 46f. See also: Erwin van der Meer, 'The Problem of Witchcraft in Malawi', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2011): 78–85.

[144] F-39:7; pastor; 30+ / F-41:5; teacher; 40+. Also: Hara, *Reformed Soteriology and the Malawian Context*, 135–36; 140. See also: Benno van den Toren, 'African Neo-Pentecostalism in the Face of Secularization: Problems and Possibilities', in *Is Africa Incurably Religious?*, eds Benno van den Toren, Joseph Bosco Bangura, and Richard E. Seed, E-Book (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2020), chap. 8.

[145] Murray, Andrew Charles, *Nyasaland en mijne ondervindingen aldaar*, 124f; 252f; Jack, *Daybreak*, 148.156; Opoku Onyinah, 'Contemporary "Witchdemonology" in Africa', *International Review of Mission* 93 (1 July 2004): 333. This problem still persists today, as indicated in: P. J. Buys, 'The Relevance of Reformed Perspectives on Demonology for Africa', *In Die Skriflig* 53, no. 4 (2019): 1–10.

[146] T.C. Botha Vlok, *Elf Jaren in Midden Afrika* (Holland: Weesinrichting Neerbosch, 1901), 14; See also: Birgit Meyer, '"Make a Complete Break with the Past." Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (1998): 316–49.

[147] See also: V. Magezi and T. Myambo, 'Pastoral Challenges and Responses to Fear of Avenging Spirits (Ngozi) in Africa: A Biblical Evaluation and Response – a Case of the Shona People', *In Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 45, no. 1 (2011): 161–87; Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Witchcraft Accusations', 23; McCracken, *A History of Malawi*, 119f.

To many Malawian Christians, the Christian faith does not exclude participation in traditional practices.[148] In the interviews, ATR is not so much referred to as a religion, but as a 'culture', as one pastor says: '*when people come out from ATR and devote themselves to the Lord, love to the Lord - they make a choice, but the old culture is still there.'* (F-46:2; pastor; 40+)[149] Malawian Christians can, on the one hand, state that the Christian faith and traditional religion do not go together, and, on the other hand, they can visit witch-doctors or diviners in special situations. However, pastors would claim that 'true believers' ('born again' Christians) will refrain from such practices and have their children baptised and fully trust in God.[150]

Munyenyembe and others contend that the neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic churches succeed better in addressing the fears of the African and Malawian people than the mainline mission churches.[151] They not only identify evil spirits and witches as demonic but also 'attack' these forces through spiritual warfare and exorcism.[152] Neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic 'deliverance services' are also attractive for members of mainline churches.[153] Some CCAP-Nkhoma pastors also organize deliverance services, to answer the pastoral problems of their church members, but also to counter the pressure from the neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.[154]

4.5.2.3. Reflection 3 — The Appropriation of Infant Baptism as an 'Espoused Answer'

Mbiti once raised the question: '*Can the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist be presented meaningfully and intelligibly to a people whose religious background lacks sacramental concepts?'*[155] However it may be, it is clear that the lines of a Christian and an ATR worldview touch each other in the sacrament of infant baptism. It is also clear that infant baptism is appropriated by Reformed parents in a creative way and makes sense in their CCAP Nkhoma context. In this research, many of the interviewed church members believe that infant baptism offers protection against all kinds of evil, which is ultimately thought to be caused by spiritual forces and/or by witchcraft ('who is behind it?'). Parents see the children as a 'battleground' between God, the devil, evil spirits or witches, in the same way as in ATR and neo-Pentecostalism.[156] By baptizing their children, parents bring the children over to God's side and put them in God's hands, assuring them of God's protection against the evil forces of the traditional African spirit world.[157] Sometimes religious hybridity remains, when

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[148] Bregje de Kok states that for Malawians, Christianity and ATR are 'two realities of a different kind', which are not mutually exclusive: De Kok, *Christianity and ATR*, 55,87.

[149] E-53:14; father; 30+

[150] F-44:8; pastor; 30+ / F:46:2-3; pastor; 40+ / F-47:12.13; pastor; 30+; / F-48:1-2; teacher; 40+. See De Kok, *Christianity and ATR*, 34 and passim.

[151] Munyenyembe, *Christianity and Socio-Cultural Issues*. For a comparable position see Laurenti Magesa, 'Christianity and African Religion. Historical Dynamics of the Encounter', in *Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (New York: Routledge, 2015), 265.

[152] Munyenyembe, *Christianity and Socio-Cultural Issues*, 75; Afe Adogame, 'The Anthopology of Evil', in *Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Kenneth R. Ross, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, and Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 311–17; Marius Nel, 'The African Background of Pentecostal Theology: A Critical Perspective', *In Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 53, no. 4 (29 May 2019).

[153] F-44:4; pastor; 30+ / F-48:7; teacher; 40+. Munyenyembe, *Christianity and Socio-Cultural Issues*, 72; Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Pr, 1999), xviii.

[154] F-44:4; pastor; 30+ / F-48:7; teacher; 40+.

[155] Mbiti, *NT Eschatology*, 116.

[156] Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, 69f; Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 93–94.

[157] For a parallell of baptismal protection against evil spirits in African Initiated Churches see Cas Wepener and Bethel Müller, 'Water Rituals as a Source of (Christian) Life in an African Independent Church: To Be Healed and (Re)Connected.', *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 54, no. 1 & 2 (2013): 11.

parents bring their child for infant baptism, yet also visit diviners or traditional healers and use charms or traditional rituals to protect their child.[158]

4.5.3. 'Belonging'

In this section, I investigate the 'belonging' aspect of the appropriation of infant baptism: what does infant baptism mean to Malawian CCAP respondents in terms of 'belonging' to God, the church and the Christian or non-Christian family members and context?

4.5.3.1. Belonging to God

'Baptism is about the relationship with God, which is initiated in infant baptism. A good relationship means: you share and can expect good things from the other, there are mutual benefits. For example, in marriage: you both receive benefits from the other — that is typical for a relationship. As a child is baptized it is brought in the right relationship with God and will receive benefits from God — baptism is an initiation of this relationship.' (E-50:12; father; 20+)

Firstly, the most common Biblical reference of the respondents is that parents bring their children to Jesus.[159] Pastors and church members often mention that children are God's children.[160] A mother says: '*God has got that responsibility to take care of this child, so the child is protected. (…) Witches and wizards, they may bewitch a child. So, because this child is in God's covenant, then the witches and wizards, they cannot bewitch this child, because the child is protected.'* (E-148:1; mother; 20+).[161]

Secondly, through infant baptism, a child is 'surrendered in God's hands',[162] 'brought at God's side'[163] and 'connected to God'[164]. This creates the assurance that the child is 'being written in the book of life' or 'being welcomed in the Kingdom of God'.[165] The child is not (or no longer) in the hands of the devil, but now it belongs to God.[166]

Finally, several pastors believe that the covenantal relationship through baptism implies God's protection against temptation to do sin: *'When children are related to God, the child will walk in the ways of the God and it will not give in to bad things under peer pressure of other young people (…) baptism in name of the Triune God means that my body has been sanctified and the devil cannot tamper it. For example, I cannot kill another person.'* (F-42:9–11.16; pastor; 40+)[167]

4.5.3.2. Belonging to the Family

'We cannot atone ourselves, but Jesus is the High priest and He can save us. But nobody can see a house burn and run away and leave the child inside. The child must also be saved and taken out from

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[158] F-44:8; pastor; 30+ / F-46:2; pastor; 40+ / F-47:12; pastor; 30+ / F-48:1; teacher; 40+. See also: Mashau, 'A Reformed Missional Perspective', 119f; De Kok, *Christianity and ATR*, 88f; Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion*, 252; Munyenyembe, *Christianity and Socio-Cultural Issues*, 79f. In Pentecostalism and the Born Again Movement, it is speaking in tongues that protects against witchcraft and evil forces, see Rijk van Dijk, 'Pentecostalism, Cultural Memory and the State - Contested Representations of Time in Postcolonial Malawi', in *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power*, ed. R. Werbner (London: Zed books, 1998), 155–81.

[159] F-43; teacher; 30+ / F-47:7; pastor; 30+ / E-50:9; mother; 20+ / E-53:2 / father; 30+ etc.

[160] F-42:8; pastor; 40+ / F-45:9; pastor; 40+ / F-47:8; pastor 30+ / E-149:10; mother; 20+

[161] E-62:2; mother; 20+ / E-53:1.3; father; 30+.

[162] E-68:3; mother; 30+ / E-69:6; father; 30+ / E-149:4; mother; 20+

[163] E-49:15; mother; 20+ / E-52:1; father; 20+ / E-55:3; father; 30+

[164] G-147:13. See also: E-55:6.11.12; father; 30+ / E-66:1; mother; 40+ / E-147:16

[165] E-60:1; mother; 20+

[166] E-53:7; father; 30+ / E-60:11; mother; 20+ / G-147:7, where all parents present agree.

[167] F-41:5; teacher; 40+

the fire; I cannot allow my child to miss what God gives me, therefore the child should be baptized and become part of the covenant.' (F-40:8; pastor; 40+).

In the first place, infant baptism is understood by pastors and church members, not only as belonging to God but also as being included in the (extended) family: if the parents are believers, the children are also part of God's family.[168] A teacher explains: '*To baptize a child is like you are committing your child to a belief you have already engaged in (…). You want him to receive what you embraced yourself and tell the child: we as a family have this God, who is all we need in life; we cannot leave anyone in our family behind; let her be part of what we already have; we have a God who saves.'* (F-38:31.32; teacher; 30+)[169] The family must stick together in the faith. Parents take a 'divine responsibility' for the Christian upbringing of their children.[170] The pastors and teachers refer to the covenant with Abraham and his family[171] and stress that parents must 'teach the children the word of God' and send them to Sunday school.[172] Even more: if parents are not faithful, this will endanger their child and the whole family.[173]
Secondly, infant baptism is important for the whole family and community: if parents don't baptize their child, people might think they don't love their child: '*it is seen as a big injustice to the child not to baptize it.'* (F-41:11; teacher; 40+) Later the child will feel neglected and it is bad if children have to tell other children that they were not baptized in infancy.[174] A father adds that an unbaptized child feels like '*raising an outcast'* in your home.[175] Parents promise to instruct their children in '*going the right path'*[176] and baptized children should follow the faith of the parents.[177] In this way, infant baptism initiates belonging to the covenantal family and also protects the child against being deceived by bad people, and demons and against committing evil deeds.

4.5.3.3. Belonging to the Church

'When a child is baptized, it feels it when it grows that it is a Christian. They know: I was baptized by that reverend — they feel that they belong to the family of Jesus Christ.' (F-46:5; pastor; 40+)

Membership of the CCAP Nkhoma is sometimes ambiguous.[178] According to the pastors, while most people belong to the CCAP out of personal conviction, there are some for whom it is merely a question of family tradition.[179] Sometimes people also join the CCAP because there is no other church in the neighbourhood.[180] Others (mostly men) join the membership class because they want

[168] E-50:14; mother; 20+: 'According to the Bible, the children are included in the parents. A child is not automatically saved, but if parents do not believe, their children will not be in paradise.'
[169] D-147:2; mother; 20+ / F-38:33; teacher; 30+. Also E-57:1; father; 40+: 'we have to move together'.
[170] F-48:14; teacher; 40+
[171] F-40:7; pastor; 40+
[172] F-46:4; pastor; 40+ / F-48:14; teacher; 40+
[173] F-42:14; pastor; 40+ / F-44:11; pastor; 30+
[174] E-50:9; father; 20+
[175] E-52:17; father; 20+
[176] E-58:3; father; 40+ / E-60:15; mother; 20+ / E-62:5; mother; 20+
[177] E-55:3.6.8; father30+ / E-62:5; mother; 20+. Also: E-149:4.9; mother; 20+. Kenneth Ross observed that up to 80% of the interviewed Presbyterians in North Malawi became church member because of their family: Kenneth R. Ross, 'Current Ecclesiological Trends in Northern Malawi', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 29, no. 4 (1 January 1999): 468.
[178] Hany Longwe, 'Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi', in *Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Kenneth R. Ross, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, and Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 91f.
[179] F-38:13; teacher; 30+ / F-40:2.3; pastor; 40+ / F-45:1; pastor; 40+ / F-46:1-2; pastor; 40+ / F-47:2; pastor; 30+ / F-48:5; teacher; 40+
[180] E-57:12; father; 40+

to marry a church member, but after the wedding, the catechumen class is often discontinued.[181] Other reasons might be to assure a future Christian funeral, which is perceived as a very honourable ceremony (over and against traditional funerals with libations, ancestor veneration and the use of alcohol).[182] For women, who form the majority and backbone of the CCAP, it is attractive to join the CCAP to become part of the 'women's guild'.[183] The women's guild is a strong organization in the local churches, which has regular meetings and fulfils diaconal tasks. The women are also active in dancing and singing during worship services.[184] Some people belong to the CCAP Nkhoma because of their ethnic or tribal identity or their majority position in the village.[185] The teachers and pastors point to the relationship between infant baptism and the church.[186] One teacher explains: Africans want to belong, '*it is awkward to say that you don't belong to a church.'*[187]
To ordinary believers, infant baptism functions not so much as initiation into the church, as an identity marker of 'being Christian', the 'entry point' into the 'family of God'.[188] One mother says: '*When a child is baptized, it becomes part of us as Christians. So, we are like one family. While if not baptized, then it's like a distant relationship. But when baptized, we become one.'* (E-67:4; mother; 40+)[189] When children behave badly, people will say: 'you are betraying your parents, who baptized you as a Christian.'[190]
Even though the relation between church membership and infant baptism is not so clear, the community of the Christian church is highly valued by ordinary believers: the church functions as a safe place and protects young people from bad influences. When children grow up they go to Sunday school classes. The church leaders take care of young people with all sorts of programmes.

4.5.4. Reflection — Belonging As 'Christian *Umunthu*'

'Umunthu is connected to the culture of Africa. A person is not an island; my life belongs to my sister and brother, aunt and nephew — we belong to each other. (…) In umunthu you try to do things with others, you share your problems and sorrow.' (F-40:5; pastor; 40+).

Traditional Chewa religiosity and spirituality are characterized by a strong commonality. The Chewa idea of '*umunthu*' (or elsewhere in Africa: '*ubuntu*') means 'genuine personhood', 'vital life force' or 'humanity toward others'.[191] It represents the 'basic values of human life or that which gives life meaning': life in a community[192] with communal values such as peace, harmony, generosity, solidarity and humanness.[193] The humanity of the individual is bound up with her or his kinsmen: 'A

[181] F-43:3; teacher; 30+ / F-48:4; teacher; 40+
[182] F-38:13; teacher; 30+ / F-42:1; pastor; 40+ / F-45:2; pastor; 40+ / F-48:4; teacher; 40+
[183] F-48:4; teacher; 40+
[184] F-38:13; teacher; 30+
[185] Also: F-41:2; teacher; 40+ /
[186] F-38:39; teacher; 30+ / F:41-8; teacher; 40+ / F-42:1; pastor 40+ / F-46:4; pastor 40+
[187] F-41:5; teacher; 40+. Same: F-48:13; teacher; 40+
[188] F-40:2.7; pastor; 40+ / F-48:13; teacher; 40+ / F-57:15; father; 40+ / E-70:14; father; 20+
[189] See also: E:149:9; mother; 20+
[190] E-57:8; father; 40+
[191] Hermann Mvula, 'Reflecting the Divine Image: The Crux of "Umunthu" in Contemporary Africa – Foundation of True Humanity', *Journal of Humanities* 25, no. 1 (17 August 2017): 82. For the genealogy of the term '*umunthu* / '*ubuntu*': C. Banda, 'Ubuntu as Human Flourishing: An African Traditional Religious Analysis of Ubuntu and Its Challenge to Christian Anthropology', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 5, no. 3 (2019): 203–28.
[192] Sindima, 'Bondedness, Moyo and Umunthu as the Elements of aChewa Spirituality: Organizing Logic and Principle of Life', 14.
[193] Jaco S. Dreyer, 'Ubuntu: A Practical Theological Perspective', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 19, no. 1 (15 June 2015): 204.

person is a person through another person'.[194] Personal realization can take place only in community and harmony with other people and the whole of creation: one cannot dance alone.[195] In the famous expression of John Mbiti: 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.'[196] The basic premise of '*umunthu*' is that the spiritual order and harmony of the world should be preserved by living according to ancestral traditions.[197] Safeguarding the community is a common responsibility and if communal harmony is disturbed, it must be restored through rituals and sacrifices.[198] The social tradition of *umunthu* makes that, for many African Christians, individual religious identity is secondary to family and tribal identity: 'blood is thicker than water'.[199] Or in the words of the Ugandan theologian Emmanuel Katongole: 'the blood of "tribalism" runs deeper than the waters of baptism'.[200]

In the interviews, the CCAP church community and the Malawian '*umunthu*' concept overlap and merge. While the influence of traditional Chewa religion seems to be declining in general, the CCAP Nkhoma adopts traits of the 'traditional' community ('*umunthu*') and takes over aspects of its social functions. A pastor explains that the community of the church is deeper than in Chewa traditional religion because it is anchored in the love of God and based on Jesus' command to love each other.[201] He also believes that the community ('*umunthu*') of the church and the village are not conflicting, because 'we all belong together'. Some pastors want the whole family and village to be a member of the church, including the village chiefs: '*we should wait for Jesus together!*'[202]

Finally, in Sub-Saharan Africa, Christian *umunthu* is regularly presented as a contextual way to overcome social and ethnic problems.[203] A Christian '*umunthu*' would transcend ATR *umunthu*, because in the church and the Christian family a deeper and 'true humanity' in Christ becomes visible. In this way, the Christian community is gradually co-opting and superseding the ATR *umunthu*.[204] Through the strong social organizations of the women's and men's guilds, the transformation of traditional initiation rites into Christian instruction, the organisation of Christian funerals and the installation of Christian chiefs, the CCAP is filling the gap of community and fellowship that is left by the gradual disappearance of ATR.[205]

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[194] Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha, 'Bumuntu', in *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, eds Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama (Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2009), 143.

[195] Molefi Kete Asante, 'Destiny', in *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama (Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2009), 198.

[196] Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 108–9.

[197] Harvey C. Kwiyani, 'Umunthu and the Spirituality of Leadership: Leadership Lessons from Malawi', *Journal of Religious Leadership* 12, no. 2 (2013): 45.

[198] Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 65.

[199] Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, 'African Cases and Theological Reflections', in *Beyond the Borders of Baptism: Catholicity, Allegiances, and Lived Identities*, ed. Michael L. Budde, Ebook (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016), 90–95; Emmanuel Katongole, '"A Blood Thicker than the Blood of Tribalism": Eucharist and Identity in African Politics', *Modern Theology* 30, no. 2 (2014): 319–25.

[200] Orobator, 'African Cases and Theological Reflections', 94; Katongole, '"A Blood Thicker"', 322.

[201] F-40:3.6; pastor; 40+

[202] F-45:3; pastor; 40+

[203] James Kombo, 'Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu. Notion of Person among African Peoples and Implications for the Christian Faith', in *Faith and Ethnicity, Vol 1*, eds Van der Borght, E.A.J.G., van Keulen, D., and Brinkman, M.E., vol. 6, Studies in Reformed Theology (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2002), 241. See for the discussion about the Christian appropriation of Umunthu: Augustine Musopole, 'Towards a Theological Method for Malawi', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 82 (1993): 37–44; Gerard Chigona, *Umunthu Theology: A Christological Response in Africa* (LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2009). For a more critical position: Mashau, 'A Reformed Missional Perspective', 119.

[204] The answers of pastors and teachers are not always congruent. Some stated that ATR is still very much present (F-43:15; teacher; 30+ / F-44:1; pastor; 30+), while others say that because of more education it has become marginal, especially in the cities (F-42:6; pastor; 40+ / F-47:14; pastor; 30+ / F-48:2; teacher; 40+).

[205] FN-59:16; teacher

This also affects the meaning of infant baptism in CCAP Nkhoma: through baptism, the child is integrated into the Christian family. Baptism is not seen as an individual ritual, which would conflict with family ties or tribal identity, but instead, the water of baptism sanctifies the blood ties. The relationship with God as established in baptism protects the family and the community against the dissociation and bad behaviour of the new generation, the influence of bad people, protection against the devil, as well as against evil powers and witches. In this way, infant baptism is appropriated in the Chewa communal worldview.

4.5.5. Behaving

After discussing 'believing' and 'belonging' aspects of the appropriation of infant baptism, I will now turn to the aspect of 'behaving'. I shall discuss how the rite of infant baptism is prepared and performed and its impact on the way of living of parents and children. Also, the question of infant and adult baptism will surface.

4.5.5.1. The Practice of Infant Baptism in CCAP-Nkhoma

'*Then we teach them what baptism means and how to accept it as a gift of God. We tell that the child is a gift of God. As parents, we are like tenants who must teach the child and bring them up, till the child itself makes a choice.'* (F-40:11; pastor; 40+)

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are typically administered four times a year in a Sunday service, which is (especially in the villages) related to the presence of the pastor.[206] This means that up to fifty children are baptized in one service.[207] A short explanation of infant baptism follows and even though it is just a short lesson, parents mention that essential instructions for life in the community are given:[208] '*if you don't have your child baptized, you don't know the instructions for the good life'* (E67:1; mother; 40+). Family members and friends are invited, pictures or video recordings are made and there is a feast afterwards, sometimes with a music band.[209]

The actual baptism is done in the Sunday worship service, after reading the official baptismal form and after the parents have publicly answered the baptismal questions.[210] Infant baptism is only done by sprinkling, but this is sometimes questioned, because of the practice of immersion in Pentecostal-Charismatic churches.

Baptism of children of church members is the official practice in the CCAP Nkhoma, but often not all children in one family are baptized. Various reasons are mentioned for this situation: people migrate to a city and connect to a local church only at a later stage, which leaves their children unbaptized, or simply negligence and 'nominal Christianity': parents see baptism only as a formal sign of membership, without spiritual meaning.[211] Finally, church discipline can be a reason for the church to refuse to administer baptism.[212]

Admission to infant baptism is mainly decided by the church elders. This is because, especially in rural areas, the pastor does not know all the church members personally but relies on the elders. Several parents mentioned that there was social pressure from the elders or relatives to baptize the newborn children because of the CCAP Nkhoma tradition, but others felt free to make their own decision.[213] At the same time, sometimes 'nominal Christians' use their relationship with a church

[206] See for the structure of the church § 4.3

[207] F-46:12; pastor; 40+

[208] E-64:8; mother; 40+ / E-148:9; mother; 20+. During the group interview the same was voiced: G-147:11.

[209] F-48:12; teacher; 40+ / E-52:1; father; 20+ / E-70:13; father; 20+

[210] See my field notes on a baptismal service in which I participated on 15-07.2018 - D-59:21.

[211] E-64:10; mother; 40+ I put the expression 'nominal Christian' in quotation marks, which indicates that the qualification is used by the interviewees.

[212] FN-59:21. Also: Hara, *Reformed Soteriology and the Malawian Context*, 138f.

[213] E-49:18; father; 20+ / E-53:11; father; 30+; E-61:5; mother; 20+

elder to have their child baptized.[214] Also, non-Christian parents sometimes ask their Christian neighbours to have their children baptized because they believe baptism will protect their children.[215]
Finally, pastors explain that grandparents or a church elder can bring a child for baptism, but only if they take responsibility for the upbringing of the child.[216] A pastor explains: '*parents have a girl who lives in sin, perhaps even in prostitution in town. When she becomes pregnant, she will leave the child with her parents in the village. (…) The grandparents don't want the child to grow up like their mother but in a spiritual way. They 'lost' their child, but want to 'save' the grandchild. Thus, to them it is very serious: baptism as a point of salvation.'* (F-41:7; teacher; 40+) This practice is confirmed by other respondents and anchored in the story of Myriam, who was watching after her little brother Moses.[217]

4.5.5.2. Baptismal Promises and Parental Responsibility

'During infant baptism, parents promise to instruct the child. Now it is God's responsibility to see if parents are abiding by their promises. They promised to take care of the child and to bring the child up in Christian values and instruct the child. So, God has to see the parents abiding by what they promised.' (G-151:14; father; 30+)

Infant baptism is administered to the children of the communicant CCAP members. Most children are brought for baptism by their mother alone, while fathers are either absent or just watching while staying in the pew because often they are not church members in full standing.[218] Some parents explain that the fathers are absent because they work as labour migrants and are out of the country at the moment of baptism.[219] Others say that the fathers are shy or 'nominal Christians' or under church discipline for various reasons, or not (yet) church members.[220] During a group interview, parents indicated that the absence of the fathers at the moment of infant baptism reflects the Malawian context, in which the responsibility for the upbringing of the children is left to the mothers (and grandparents); this includes the upbringing in the faith.[221]
An often-heard complaint is that children are baptised out of tradition and that parents do not fulfil their baptismal promises.[222] Several pastors and parents indicate that CCAP elders often urge parents to baptize their children, not supported by any explanation of the meaning of the rite.[223] There are also other situations: one father admits that he asked for baptism for his child out of tradition, but during the worship service he was suddenly struck by the baptismal questions and the responsibility he was taking for the child and now he tries to be faithful.[224]
Pastors and parents agree that infant baptism is the start of the 'project' of Christian upbringing and life: the communal journey of socialisation in the fold of the Christian family and Sunday school starts at baptism.[225] If parents 'give their child in infant baptism' the child has 'started life with God'

[214] F-43:13; teacher; 30+
[215] E-147:7-group
[216] F-38:39; pastor; 30+ / F-44:12; pastor; 30+ / F-41:7; teacher; 40+ / F-46:9; pastor; 40+
[217] F-42:18; pastor; 40+
[218] F-41:13; teacher; 40+ / F-42:18; pastor; 40+ / F-47:6; pastor; 30+ / FN-50:17; teacher; 30+
[219] E-54:3; father; 40+
[220] FN-59:31. One teacher explained that many fathers are under church discipline because of drunkenness or adultery, but there is no time for pastoral visits and mentoring in order to bring the men back. Excommunication is not practised, so these men remain 'in limbo'. FN-59:17.
[221] G-147:17; parents; 30+. The absence of the fathers at baptism is also familiar to other parts of Southern Africa: Wepener and Müller, 'Water Rituals', 7.
[222] F-38:32; teacher; 30+ / F-41:8; teacher; 40+
[223] F-46:6; pastor; 40+ / E-49:18; father; 20+ / E-53:11; father; 30+ / E-61:5; mother; 20+
[224] E-52:2.18; father; 20+
[225] F-42:16; pastor; 40+ / F-43:8; teacher; 30+ / E-60:3; mother; 20+ / E-69:8.11; father; 30+ / G-147:2

and 'taken the first step in Christian life' and can be instructed in the faith.[226] Some parents believe there is an instant change of life in baptism ('born again' or 'starting a new life'), and many respondents believe that after baptism the child will grow spiritually and refrain from bad behaviour.[227] A mother remarks: '*It means you are heaven-bound when you are baptized*.'[228] In general, respondents see baptism as important for the start of a holy life, but they also recognize that baptized children can lose their faith when they grow up.[229]
Baptizing and upbringing of children have a communal function, both for the church and for society. One pastor claims that children who go to Sunday school perform better at school than those who don't go.[230] Children who are brought up in a Christian way can be servants in the church and will also be useful in society.[231]

4.5.5.3. Divine and Human Agency

Some pastors and teachers say that God takes the initiative in making the covenant.[232] Other pastors and most interviewed church members believe that the covenant is made by the parents: in baptism, they 'give', 'dedicate' or 'introduce' the child to God.[233] Parents make promises and trust that now God will take responsibility.[234] The goal of entering into the covenant with God is protection and the spiritual growth of the child. One father says: '*I have baptized him to make an agreement between our family and God. That we have put our child into the hands of God so that he must grow spiritually. (…) We can't grow or we can't survive without God. God is our protector. We give our son in the hands of God so that He can protect him.'* (…) '*I have made the covenant between that God as well as with the son.'* (E-70:1 and 13; father; 20+) A teacher comments that parents believe that '*because of the covenant relationship God is there to provide the needs in the life of the child. (…) We make a covenant with God — we do our part and God will do his part*.' (F-48:8.14; teacher; 40+)
Typically, the respondents focus on the responsibilities of the parents and their promises to God instead of on God's promises to the child and the parents.[235] Some parents indicate that infant baptism is a 'call from God', which they must obey.[236] The stress is on human responsibility, rather than on a divine promise.
It is noteworthy that the CCAP baptismal form speaks about the promise God made to Abraham. Also, Peter's reference to God's promise 'for you and your children' on the first day of Pentecost is cited in the baptismal form.[237] However, none of the parents and only one teacher mentions the idea of God 'making a promise' at baptism and this pastor explains this promise of God in terms of responsibility for the parents, instead of a promise of grace: '*Parents understand: all of my family members must be dedicated to the covenant.'* (F-43:5; teacher; 30+) Another aspect of responsibility

[226] E-61:7; mother; 20+. See also: E-51:14; mother; 20+ / E-53:1; father; 30+ / E-55:8; father; 30+ / E-58:5; father; 40+ / E-64:6; mother 40+
[227] F-42:9; pastor; 40+ / F-43:6; teacher; 30+; E-57:14; father; 40+ / E-63:2 mother; 20+ / E-69:1.8; father; 30
[228] E-62:4; mother; 20+
[229] E-51:17; father; 20+ / E-53:6; father; 30+
[230] F-42:1.14; pastor; 40+
[231] FN-59:24
[232] F-39:8; pastor; 30+ / F-40:7.8; pastor; 40+
[233] F-43:5; teacher; 30+ F-46:4; pastor; 40+ / / E-50:11; mother; 20+ / E-51:14; father; 20+ / E-53:3; father; 30+ / E-70:1; father; 20+
[234] E-70:13; father; 20+ / E-147:1; mother; 20+
[235] F-48:8; teacher; 40+ / G-151:14; father; 30+
[236] E-52:22; father; 20+ / E-53:14; father; 30+
[237] CCAP Book of Church Order-36:18

is that a pastor and several parents mentioned the possibility of 'ancestral sin': children are punished because of the sins of the parents. Having a child baptized helps to avoid this.[238]

4.5.6. Reflections

In our reflection on the 'behaving' aspect of infant baptism in Central Malawi, I wish to focus on three aspects: child upbringing as a 'project', legalism, and the covenant as a 'contract' between parents and God.

4.5.6.1. Reflection 1 — The Child as 'Project'

'Infant baptism is important because we can take the example of a tree. It is very hard to straighten and bend a tree if it's grown up. So too with children. They are to be brought up in Christian values from infancy. While they are young, then they grow in that family.' (G-147:16; mother; 30+)

In ATR, humans are believed to have an innate sense of good and evil: man is 'born to be good'. Human nature can be formed in the right or wrong direction.[239] A human being is a 'project' because, according to ATR, right after its birth a child is not yet fully 'human', not a person, but just an 'it' and vulnerable to illness or evil forces. It needs to be 'humanized' in the first weeks through traditional rituals, which include bathing the child with special herbal medicines or giving the child a string with medicines around the waist. This will protect the child from illness and witchcraft.[240] When the child grows up, the Malawian moral narratives are handed over, as well as the values of the family and society. As the character is formed, a child becomes ever more 'human' — a moral agent in the *'umunthu'* context of his family and tribe.[241]
Infant baptism also marks the beginning of the 'project' of Christian upbringing: many respondents indicated that, after infant baptism, the child enters a 'different level' because now it is in a relationship with God, and now it can be taught. Through daily prayer, the parents bring the child to God's attention. One mother shared that only one of her four children was baptized and this child was the only one that was still part of the church: '*God did protect this child who was given in infancy for baptism.'*[242] In short: the path of 'Christian *umunthu*' starts at infant baptism. Parents take responsibility for the upbringing of their children and feel the burden: God will control them. At the same time, they also share the burden with God: He will do his part when the parents obey and pray.

4.5.6.2. Reflection 2 — Legalism

'It is a kind of 'evangelistic whipping': if you don't do it as a preacher, people don't really respect you.' (F-38: 21.23; teacher; 30+)

The CCAP Nkhoma has a reputation for moral strictness, by rejecting smoking, drinking, and polygamy, forbidding participation in ATR rituals, using magic objects or consulting diviners or witch doctors. Church elders, in particular, who have little theological training and do most of the preaching in the villages, stress these moral rules in their sermons and teaching. Pastors, too,

[238] F-38:20; teacher; 30+ / F-44:11; pastor; 30+ / E-51:14; mother; 20+ / E-53:7; father; 30+ / E-70:11; father; 20+ / E-148:3; mother; 30+ / G-151:6
[239] Nkulu-N'Sengha, 'Bumuntu', 145–46; Kwame Gyekye, 'African Ethics', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2011 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2011), 4, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/african-ethics/.
[240] Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion*, 180f; See also: Mbiti, *NT Eschatology*, 117.
[241] Nkulu-N'Sengha, 'Bumuntu', 144; Gyekye, 'African Ethics', 4.
[242] E-67:1; mother; 40+

emphasise the law, but they also preach about a personal relationship with Christ.[243] Several pastors and teachers characterise the general approach as legalistic: preaching the law at the expense of grace and a personal relationship with God.[244] This is, according to them, also tangible in the way many pastors, at baptism, point out the duties to the parents.[245]

Among the parents, there is also much stress on following the law. One father says: '*So if you believe in Him, it means we can be saved. But for us to believe, there are so many things to be followed. Yeah. And some of those things is baptizing...'* (E-70:11; father 20+). A mother says: *'Because baptism goes with words of God, instructions from the Word of God, and you live following Christian values through these instructions, so it is easy for you to get saved.'* (E-148:2; mother; 30+) God's saving grace, as demonstrated in the sign of baptism, is sometimes referred to in the interviews with pastors, but the main message the parents appropriate from the sermons and teaching is that they should be zealous in teaching their children Christian behaviour.[246]

The roots of legalism are — at least in part — to be found firstly in the teaching of the early missionaries to Central Malawi. Andrew C. Murray and his Scottish colleagues were influenced by the Pietist Revivals and Holiness Movement.[247] They found 'little sense of sin and wrongdoing among the people' and thus they put much effort into the preaching of the Ten Commandments as a 'preparation' for the preaching of grace.[248] As mentioned earlier: Murray designed a Catechism which is used for teaching in the Nkhoma-congregations up to this day. Pauw criticizes the theological design of this Catechism for taking its starting point in a broad treatment of the law (cf. the Dutch 'Kort Begrip'), which opens the door to legalism instead of preaching grace: salvation is for the 'achievers' (Fiedler).[249]

Secondly, legalism is also dominant in ATR and focuses on the ritual observance of traditions and taboos to appease the ancestors and avoid evil and punishment for the community. In this same line, some parents believe that God's role is to 'control' whether parents keep their promises at infant baptism, while others are relieved that, because they have fulfilled the duty of infant baptism, God will now do his part. This reflects an instrumental use of religion, without a personal relationship with the Supreme Deity or ancestors.[250]

In conclusion, we can say that the legalist inclination in the CCAP Nkhoma can be traced back to at least two sources: missionary preaching and the presence of the ATR worldview. Some teachers mention a changing attitude among younger pastors who stress God's grace and personal faith more in their sermons than the keeping of the law. In this way, they try to overcome the heritage of the past.[251]

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[243] F-38:12.13.18; teacher; 30+ / F-42:5-6; pastor. See also: Todd Statham, 'Teetotalism in Malawian Protestantism: Missionary Origins, African Appropriation', *Studies in World Christianity* 21, no. 2 (29 July 2015): 161–82.

[244] F-38:12; teacher; 30+ / F-43:2; teacher; 30+ / E-49:9; father; 20+. See also: Kenneth R. Ross, 'Preaching in Mainstream Christian Churches in Malawi: A Survey and Analysis', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 25, no. 1 (1995): 3–24.

[245] F-47:1; pastor; 30+

[246] F-39:9.14; pastor; 30+

[247] L.J-M. Osborne and H. J. Hendriks, 'The Limitation of the Salvation Model: A Malawian Experience', *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal = Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 45, no. 1/2 (2004): 79; Statham, 'Teetotalism in Malawian Protestantism'.

[248] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*, 67. See also: Murray, *Nyasaland*, 189f.

[249] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*, 329.

[250] F-38:20; teacher; 30+

[251] F-38:21.23; teacher; 30+ / F-39:6; pastor; 30+

4.5.6.3. Reflection 3 — Making a Covenant

'Christ shows me how to live, what I am supposed to do, to say; I expect from Him every day that He communicates to me; I expect love from Him; I serve him, but also expect forgiveness from Him, as I am not perfect.' (E-49:12; father; 20+)

One of the teachers remarks that understanding infant baptism as a dedication to God and protection against witches comes close to the 'traditional' dedication in ATR, where safeguarding the good relationship with the invisible world depends on the faithfulness of the parents and children: '*In the past, people thought: after being dedicated in ATR the child is protected against evil spirits. In baptism it is the same: evil spells and evil powers are overcome if you dedicate a child to God for a good life*.' (F-43:15; teacher 30+). In ATR, the idea is that the spirit to whom a child is dedicated will protect the child from witches and evil spirits.[252] This is what parents expect now from God through infant baptism![253] Parents often mention that they pray for their children that they may be protected, kept from sin and 'saved' by God.[254] In this respect, parents fulfil an intercessory role: without their active prayer, there might be problems with the child. One mother explains: '*(now the child is baptized) it will be easy to pray: "remember your child so-and-so*."' (E-68; mother; 30+)[255] As long as children do not yet belong to the covenant, they are vulnerable, but now God sees them. One could say that this sounds like the 'ritual obligation' in ATR, but I also noticed that parents speak about their prayers and their trust in the one God, who will help them and their children.[256] This is in line with what was found earlier: pastors stress the responsibility of the parents in the upbringing of their children, while parents focus on God's protection through baptism and pray for His help and assistance in the charge of the upbringing.

4.5.6.4. Reflection 4 — Inconsistent Practice of Infant Baptism

'I saw a tremendous growth in the number of baptisms after I explained to the church the meaning of infant baptism. Teaching is essential.' (F-45:9; pastor; 40+)

Even though pastors and church members confirmed the importance and meaning of baptism, the actual baptismal practice is 'inconsistent':

1. In many CCAP families, not all children are baptized, some families have not baptized their children at all. This is because of undefined 'circumstances', or the absence of the fathers who are working far away. Sometimes parents give contradictory explanations: one mother states that a child is not baptized because of spiritual laziness or backsliding of the father, while the father states that he prefers adult baptism.[257]
2. The CCAP officially asks for 'no delay' in the practice of infant baptism, but many children are baptized at ages 2 to 4. This also seems to contradict what is said by parents about the importance of infant baptism and the protection and blessing that is expected from it.[258] In the case of an early baptism, it seems to be mainly out of fear that the child might be unprotected.[259]
3. From the comments of pastors and teachers it is clear that, even though the CCAP practises infant baptism, there is not much attention to teaching and explaining its meaning. Elders in villages stress

[252] See F-43:14; teacher; 30+. Cf. Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 93–94.
[253] E-50:9; father; 20+ / E-51:17; father; 20+ / E-52:19; father; 20+ / E-53:3; father; 30+
[254] E-50:11; mother; 20+ / E-55:3; father; 30+ / E-149:2; mother; 20+
[255] E-70:5; father; 20+
[256] Compare the Nigerian theologian Ogbu Kalu, who mentions how in ATR individuals and communities can make covenants (or 'covenant in blood') with local deities and ancestors, the obligations of which are also valid for the children. In Christian conversion these old covenants must be exchanged for a new one with Jesus Christ. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 80f.
[257] E-64:10; mother; 40+ / E-54:3; father; 40+
[258] E-53:7; father; 30+
[259] F-43:15; teacher; 30+

the importance of infant baptism, but pay little attention to its spiritual meaning, while pastors often have little time to put more effort into teaching.
4. In the early missionary period of the CCAP, baptism was only administered after clear instruction and to dedicated parents, while in the CCAP Nkhoma today also many 'nominal Christians' have their children baptised. This results in some Reformed parents preferring adult baptism over infant baptism. This preference is also stimulated by the criticism of the Evangelical-Pentecostal churches who, accusing mainstream churches of moral laxity, practise adult baptism as a deliberate choice of the believer for Jesus, a promise of a dedicated Christian life and a radical break with ATR practices.[260]

4.5.7. Experiencing

Regarding this aspect of appropriation, I enquired into the experience of God's active presence in and through infant baptism, as well as about the feelings or emotions of the parents.

4.5.7.1. Relieved by God's Protection

'The parents experience the presence of the Lord; we teach them that baptism is serious — God is really in that; through faith, the parents believe God is present — they have the covenant with Him. Obviously, the parents expect that once they baptize the child God is also with them.' (F-47:8; pastor; 30+)

Worship services in CCAP Nkhoma are sometimes in formal 'Western style' and in English, but often in a local style, in Chichewa: joyful and abundant with a music band, choirs, dancing, singing, clapping and expressive prayers.
When discussing spiritual or religious experiences around infant baptism, pastors indicate that parents feel glad and relieved after the baptism of their child. Some pastors relate this to the forgiveness of sin: '*Parents feel relieved: we are born sinners, but in Christ, through his baptism, sin is taken away.'* (F-40:15; pastor; 40+) Other pastors did not deny this, but would rather stress the aspect of belonging: '*This is a relief [for the parents]: my child is in relationship with God; God heard my prayer that my child may be in relationship with Him; therefore, they make joy for the Lord.'* (F-47:9; pastor; 30+)[261] Another pastor believes that after baptism the Holy Spirit starts working in the child[262] and a colleague adds, that a baptized child is 'holy', sanctified and cannot commit heinous sins.[263]
Listening to the ordinary believers, we hear a partly different narrative. Firstly, the joyful experience around infant baptism is, for half of them, related to the battle between God and evil forces as described above. Parents feel 'relieved' after baptism because they believe that the child is now on God's side, protected against sin and against witches. During a group interview, a father said: '*I felt very good because I realized that this child is protected because the name of Jesus is very powerful against an evil force. So, the child is protected and so I felt very good when I gave my children in baptism*.' (G-147:4; father; 30+)[264] This was confirmed by the other group members.
Secondly, several pastors mention that parents experience God's agency in baptism and understand its seriousness.[265] Several parents refer to God and (sometimes) the Holy Spirit acting at baptism and being protectively present in the child after baptism.[266] In general, however, God's agency is not

[260] F-44:16; pastor; 30+ / F-46:13; pastor; 40+ / F-47:14; pastor; 30+
[261] F-40:12; pastor; 40+ / F-42:10-11; pastor; 40+ / F-44:14; pastor; 30+
[262] F-46:9; pastor; 40+
[263] F-42:16; pastor; 40+
[264] E-66:1; mother; 40+
[265] F-47:8.9; pastor; 30+
[266] E-51:14; mother; 20+ / E-52:16; father; 20+ / E-53:4; father; 30+ / G-147:8; father; 30+

a personal relationship, but an effective saving from evil powers and an experience of 'power'.[267] A mother states: *'Words have power. They create things. So, I believe baptism protects the little ones from evil. Because the enemy is afraid of what was said when the children were being baptized. I believe when the pastor says that prayer after baptism, covering the children with the blood of Jesus, I believe the children are covered. From the enemy, from the evil one.*' (E-60:7.10; mother; 20+)

4.5.7.2. Joyful on the Way with God

A pastor explained: '*I look into the eyes of the children, because I may see something that encourages me; sometimes the children are very happy and glad. Some of these children will be pastors or real Christians — very important. I don't know how, but God is working in them.'* (F-45:8; pastor; 40+). There is also joy because of God's love: '*See, looking at the child looking helpless and clueless of anything happening. And we're putting the water on the child and just looking at what it signifies and symbolizes okay in my heart it's like … God is amazing*.' (E-52:22; father; 20+).[268]
Also, parents share that they are 'happy' and 'proud' to have their child baptized because the child joins the family in serving God: '*the child is going to be like us.'* (E-57:11; father; 40+) Parents feel 'happy' and 'appeased' because they trust that God will help them in the upbringing of their child. God will keep and protect the child from sin and evil forces and thus the child will behave morally.[269] Some parents felt very excited because baptism is the first step of their child in the Christian faith.[270] A mother places this in an eschatological perspective: '*I wouldn't want any of my children to miss heaven. (…). The Bible says there will be no marriages in heaven. But seeing my children, spending eternal life with them is going to be something is going to make me a very proud mom. Because then I'll know that I ran the race perfectly well. Because all the children that God gave me are in eternal life with me*.' (E-61:3; mother; 20+)[271] In this way, there is joy because the child started its life with God.

4.5.8. Reflection — Trusting in God's Care

A teacher remarked that speaking about feelings and emotions is often seen as a sign of weakness or shame in Malawi.[272] This might explain why not all interviewees were abundantly sharing their 'experience' of infant baptism. At the same time, pastors and parents nearly all expressed emotions of joy and relief, trust in God's care and protection in and through infant baptism.
In baptism, parents first share the burden of their worries about the safety and future of their children with God: they entrust their child to God, as His child. They are thankful that there is now a covenant with God and that He will keep the child safe.
Secondly, even though most parents believe that the initiative for 'making that covenant' is taken by them, they trust that through baptism the child is taken into God's care.
Thirdly, God's omnipresence and his good care for parents and children are believed by all respondents and a number of the interviewees believe in a special divine action or presence of God in infant baptism, while the work of the Holy Spirit is mentioned sometimes. By most parents God is experienced as a 'high God', but not as a 'distant' God: through baptism, a child is brought into God's fellowship and care.

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[267] E-61:1; mother; 20+
[268] FN-59:5
[269] E:53:14; father; 30+ / E-55:4; father; 30+ / E-56:2; father; 30+ / E-62:6; mother; 20+ / E-70:4; father; 20+ / G-147:8; mother; 30+ / E-149:2; mother; 20+
[270] E-61:6.7; mother; 20+
[271] Comparable: E-52:2.18.19; father; 20+
[272] FN-59:26

4.5.9. Mutual Relationship between Believing, Belonging, Behaving and Experiencing

After discussing the four aspects of appropriation, I now look at the mutual relationship between these aspects, which together shape the 'baptismal narrative' for Malawi.

4.5.9.1. Believing and Behaving

The CCAP baptismal form characterizes infant baptism first of all as a sign of 'washing of sin' by relating the sign of water to the blood of Jesus, which cleanses and removes sin. This is also taught by the pastors. However, even though most parents believe that their children are 'born sinners', they understand this not as being personally 'guilty', but as being 'vulnerable' to evil forces. Most parents do not relate the 'water sign' of infant baptism to forgiveness or 'washing of sin', and the sign itself seems to make little impression.

Secondly, the baptismal form says children must be baptized because they are already in the covenant. However, parents say that, in infant baptism, they are 'making a covenant' with God. God is made responsible for a good life and the protection of the child against evil and bad behaviour.[273]

Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly: several congregation members stress the importance of infant baptism for protection against the devil and witchcraft. In the past, Reformed missionaries, teachers and pastors failed to recognize and pay pastoral attention to the fears of evil spirits and witchcraft among the Malawian Reformed converts. This gap seems to be bridged by the appropriation of infant baptism: even though pastors keep this quiet, for most CCAP believers protection against witches and evil spirits (some would add: 'covered by the blood of Jesus') is becoming part of the Reformed baptismal narrative, a fresh appropriation which gives parents relief and joy. Several CCAP parents believe in 'full protection' by God through infant baptism, as a Malawian Reformed appropriation of baptism. Others have some of their children baptized, but also go to diviners or witch doctors and use charms to protect their children.

Finally, some parents, who are not Christian believers or church members, want their children to be baptized through the intervention of Christian neighbours or church elders, and show a 'behaving without believing'. In this case, infant baptism is just another protective ritual, equal to the ATR rituals. From this last observation, I also conclude that the Christian church seems to fill the void of the waning influence of ATR.[274]

4.5.9.2. Believing and Experiencing

For many parents, the most impressive moment is not the sign of water, but the solemn words during the service: the baptismal form, the baptismal prayer, and the 'name of Jesus' being proclaimed over the child. This assures them of God's protection of the child.

This stress on the power of words fits well in the Malawian context. Kunhiyop writes about the blessings and curses in ATR: 'the spoken word has intrinsic power which is released by the act of utterance and is independent of it.'[275] In ATR, blessings come through the divinities and ancestors, but the liturgy of infant baptism offers a Christian alternative. The attention to the almost magical power of the word is also present in African neo-Pentecostalism.[276]

However, the 'experience' aspect of appropriation also raises some questions for a Western researcher. Firstly, I conclude from the interviews that parents speak about infant baptism as something really important, which protects a child against all kinds of evil, bad behaviour, witches and the devil. Several parents speak about a divine presence at the baptism of their child.

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[273] F-48:8.14; teacher; 40+ / E-50:9; father; 20+ / E-53:1.3; father; 30+ / G-147:6; mother; 30+

[274] One of the gatekeepers states that ATR is gaining strength in different forms in Malawi today and for that reason it is 'unbalanced' to say, that the CCAP is filling the void of ATR (D-212; Gatekeeper M2), while other gatekeepers concur with my conclusion.

[275] Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, 108; Mbiti, *NT Eschatology*, 120.

[276] J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations From an African Context* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2013), 127,176.

At the same time, it is then difficult to understand why many parents have only some of their children baptized.
Secondly, what is said by both pastors and parents about 'making a covenant' and putting the child in God's hands and 'at his side' seems to fit in more with the instrumental understanding of rituals in ATR than with a personal relationship with the God of the Covenant.[277]
The question is whether parents indeed understand infant baptism as a protective covenantal relationship with God. Or is the ATR magical way of thinking guiding the perception of the 'power words' which are spoken by the pastor at infant baptism?[278] Or is there a parallel with Pentecostalism, where words and anointments have a protective and nearly magical power, which seems to be equal to the protection which parents believe to receive by infant baptism?

4.5.9.3. Behaving and Experiencing

Comparing the experience related to infant baptism with the 'instrumental' use of ATR rituals, we notice similarities as well as differences. In ATR, the Supreme Being is a high and distant God. People trust his benevolence, but there is no intimate relationship and rituals are performed in a utilitarian way, as a form of 'religious negotiation', which is believed to influence the attitude of the spirit world, change a bad situation and bring blessings. Among the CCAP believers, too, a personal or intimate relationship with God is not characteristic. Several expressions of congregation members — 'we do our part and we trust God will do his part' — match the instrumentality of religion in ATR. The fact that some parents also turn to ATR practices to protect their children seems to point in this direction.
On the other hand, several church members also say that this 'high' God helps them in daily life and listens to their prayers. They trust in the care and protection of the 'high God' for their baptized child and refer to a 'divine presence' in infant baptism, which reflects God's direct involvement. I conclude that in the CCAP there is a range of different experiences, varying from utilitarian instrumentalism to the comforting trust that, in baptism, God shows his protective presence.

4.5.9.4. Belonging and Believing

For pastors, infant baptism is important from a spiritual perspective: the washing of sin and the inclusion of the child in God's covenant. For church elders, it is important to keep the CCAP tradition alive and to make sure that children are baptized and they, therefore, urge parents to do so.[279] For most ordinary believers, however, to bring the child 'to God's side' and 'being accepted' by God are the most common expressions, which point first of all to God's protection.[280]
These different appropriations can be illustrated with the understanding of the 'blood of Christ'. According to the pastors, Jesus' blood points to forgiveness of sin, but for at least half of the parents, it symbolizes, first of all, protection against evil powers, witches and other bad influences. This last understanding is also attractive for parents who are not church members and it fits well into both the ATR and Charismatic or neo-Pentecostal context. The Kenyan theologian, Kunhiyop, remarks that 'the idea that the blood of Christ is protective derives more from an African approach to blood

[277] See also Van den Toren, who calls this instrumentalization a 'secularization of religion', which means that religious practices and rituals (ATR, Christian or Islam) are used to achieve 'our secular goals, like health or success in politics, business or love', without a spiritual relation with a deity or inner conviction: Benno van den Toren, 'Secularisation in Africa: A Challenge for Churches', *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 22, no. 1 (2003): 10f; Van den Toren, 'Neo-Pentecostalism'; Messi-Metogo, 'Religious Indifference and Critique in Traditional Africa'.
[278] Turaki, *Christianity and African Gods*, 87.
[279] F-46:6; pastor; 40+ / E-54:7; father; 40+
[280] See Davie Gordon Mbale, 'A Theological Investigation into the Meaning of Conversion Among the Members of Chatoloma Congregation CCAP Synod of Livingstonia' (Master Thesis (unpublished), Theological University Kampen, 2020).

sacrifices than it does from the Scriptures.'[281] Interestingly enough, Munyenyembe reports that in Charismatic worship services 'the blood of Jesus is poured or sprinkled around an area or object to prevent any evil or any wiles of the devil from confounding the believers' activities.'[282]
These observations confirm my understanding that infant baptism is appropriated by at least a group of parents as a 'protective belonging', in which the blood of Christ serves as a protective veil against spiritual evil forces.

4.5.9.5. Belonging and Behaving

Behaving in CCAP Nkhoma is tightly intertwined with belonging. One pastor says: '*infant baptism is like a wedding ring, it is like an engagement with God: you belong to someone.*'[283] Pastors stress the responsibility of the parents to keep their baptismal promise and to bring up the child according to the norms and rules of the Christian faith and the CCAP traditions. They strive for an all-embracing Christian *umunthu*, in which whole families and communities are included. However, several pastors and teachers mention the lack of dedication to a Christian upbringing and the problem of 'nominal Christians', who belong to the CCAP for social or practical reasons.[284] Parents and grandparents explain that they are anxious to live a 'holy life' according to the baptismal promises, to avoid their children suffering divine punishment for 'ancestral sins'. At the same time, the burden of the Christian upbringing is mostly left to the mothers. The absence of the fathers at baptism shows the vulnerability of the 'project' of the Christian upbringing of the children. The inconsistent practice of infant baptism by many CCAP parents also suggests that a Christian *umunthu* is far from being realized.

4.5.9.6. Belonging and Experiencing

Several pastors and parents mention the work of God and the Holy Spirit concerning the protection and divine presence in the lives of their children.[285] Whereas in ATR people have only mediated contact with the Supreme Being (through ancestors and spirits), in baptism Christians dedicate their children directly to God. Parents trust that they can easily pray for their baptized children as God knows them.
In this sense, Christianity has made an impact, at least for several ordinary believers: the 'high' God became an 'approachable' God, who, also in infant baptism, assures believers that He cares for their children and protects them.[286] At the same time, the distance to God remains: He is not prayed to as a loving Father and Jesus, who came near to us and lived among us, is hardly mentioned in this narrative.

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[281] Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, 128.
[282] Munyenyembe, *Christianity and Socio-Cultural Issues*, 73. See for the Pentecostal reaction: Rijk van Dijk, 'Witchcraft and Scepticism by Proxy: Pentecostalism and Laughter in Urban Malawi', in *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders (London: Routledge, 2001), 97–117.
[283] F-39:13; pastor; 30+
[284] F-39:2 pastor; 30+ / F-41:1; teacher; 40+ / F-48:1; teacher; 40+ / E-49:6; father; 20+; E-51:14; mother; 20+. See also: Nicolette D. Manglos, 'Born Again in Balaka: Pentecostal versus Catholic Narratives of Religious Transformation in Rural Malawi', *Sociology of Religion* 71, no. 4 (2010): 409–31. She contends that conversion in neo-Pentecostal and Roman Catholic rural churches in Malawi is not about changing beliefs, but about 'right behaviour'.
[285] E-52:16; father; 20+ / E-53:4; father; 30+ / E-60:1; mother; 20+ / G-147:8; father; 30+
[286] E-51:1; mother; 20+ / E-52:19; father; 20+ / E-57:9.12; father; 40+ / E-62:5; mother; 20+ / E-63:5; mother; 20+

4.6. Baptismal Narrative — a Central Malawian Appropriation

Through the act of infant baptism, parents dedicate their child to God and bring it to God's side. Parents believe that through baptism the child is protected from evil and witchcraft, which is the work of God and the Holy Spirit (believing).

The child now shares in the 'Christian umunthu': belonging to God, the covenantal family and shares the Christian identity (belonging).

In the project of upbringing in the Christian community, the child will become a true 'human' being, who will more easily abstain from sin (behaving).

Parents experience relief and joy and sometimes God's presence in baptism (experience).

This can be visualized in this way:

Figure 4 Baptismal Narrative CCAP Nkhoma Malawi

4.7. Summarizing Reflections

The CCAP Nkhoma is a 'mission church' and infant baptism was introduced to the Malawian Reformed converts by the missionaries from the South African 'Dutch Reformed Church'. In the context of poverty, high mortality rates and vulnerable agriculture, the ATR worldview, with its fear of the traditional 'spirit world', is present among CCAP believers: problems, illnesses and poverty can all be caused by evil spiritual forces.

Christian parents often see their children as a battleground between evil spirits and God. Infant baptism is often appropriated by ordinary believers as a means of divine protection, which eases the fear of spiritual forces and encourages them to bring up their children in the Christian faith. Parents

state that in infant baptism they make a covenant with God, dedicate the child to God as 'his child' and bring the child to His side. The child is symbolically covered by the blood of Jesus, which protects it against evil, the devil and witchcraft.
Parents feel joyful after baptizing their child and believe that, through baptism, the child becomes part of the 'Christian *umunthu*': the fellowship with God, the Christian family and the church. After making this covenant, parents believe that 'high' God will easily remember the child when they pray for it and He will do his part to protect the child, forgive sins, and keep the child on the right moral track. Some ordinary believers witness an experience of God's presence at infant baptism. There is also a double practice by parents who have their child baptized while also using ATR charms and rituals or visiting diviners. This illustrates the doubts of some of the ordinary believers regarding the power and lasting effectiveness of God's baptismal protection.
This baptismal narrative is given first of all by the congregation members, while pastors and teachers indicate that they preach and believe in the Reformed teaching of baptism as the sign and seal of the covenant and in the forgiveness of sin as formulated in the classical Reformed confessions.
The appropriation of Reformed infant baptism is an ongoing process, which gives rise to several theological questions: What will happen to the Reformed narrative of baptism in Malawi if CCAP Nkhoma pastors integrate the idea of 'protection' in their baptismal theology? What will the CCAP Nkhoma appropriation of infant baptism mean for the participation in ATR rituals? Can infant baptism effectively serve as a 'starting point' for living a Christian '*umunthu*'?

5. Appropriation of Infant Baptism in the RCN, The Netherlands[1]

The goal of this research is to understand the appropriation of infant baptism by Reformed believers in different contexts. In this chapter, I first wish to give a short description of the context in which these churches live and in which they practise infant baptism. Subsequently, I will describe and analyse the results of the empirical research, and relate the findings to the cultural-religious context.

5.1. The Cultural-Religious Context — Secularization: Is God Leaving the Netherlands?

For many centuries, the Netherlands has been regarded as a Christian nation and the Reformed church was deeply intertwined with Dutch history and identity.[2] Around 1900, up to 98% of the Dutch population was formally connected to a Christian church, either Protestant or Roman Catholic, but many of them were nominal Christians.[3] In 1966, church membership or religious affiliation was reduced to 67% and this went down to 31% in 2015.[4] The number of regular churchgoers dwindled from 50% to 10% between 1966 and 2015, which is a high percentage in comparison to neighbouring countries.[5] The decline still continues in the 21st century and the Dutch situation is now 'average' in comparison to other European countries.[6] However, Dutch churches and Christians continued to play an important role in social institutions, education and media, which were divided according to religious and political affiliation ('pillarization'[7]).[8] From the 1990s on, there is a renewed interest in 'spirituality' in Dutch society, attention to mental health, personal (religious) experience, the personal authentic search for 'meaning' in life and New Age.[9]

'Secularization' is often mentioned as an important factor to be able to understand the Dutch religious situation. Taylor discerns three forms of secularization in the Western world.[10] Firstly, the separation of church and state, in which religion becomes a private matter. Secondly, the loss of religious beliefs and practices. Thirdly, Taylor points to the difference between the 'porous self' of the 'enchanted' worldview and the 'buffered self' of the 'modern' worldview, a change in human

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[1] In this chapter there will be many references to Dutch authors, sources, names and citations from interviews in Dutch. Dutch expressions or names are written in italic. As far as possible, English translations of Dutch publications will be used as reference, in order to include non-Dutch readers. Other translations into English are by the researcher.

[2] A.Th. van Deursen, *Bavianen en slijkgeuzen. Kerk en kerkvolk ten tijde van Maurits en Oldenbarnevelt*, 3rd ed. (Franeker, Netherlands: Van Wijnen, 1998); J. van Eijnatten and Fred van Lieburg, *Nederlandse religiegeschiedenis* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2006).

[3] This number does not say anything about actual involvement in church activities or personal faith.

[4] Joep de Hart and Pepijn van Houwelingen, *Christenen in Nederland. Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke gelovigheid* (Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport, 2018), 22, https://www.scp.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2018/12/19/christenen-in-nederland.

[5] De Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband. Godsdienstige ontwikkelingen in Nederland*, 9.

[6] De Hart and Van Houwelingen, *Christenen in Nederland. Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke gelovigheid*, 34. See also: https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2020/51/meerderheid-nederlandse-bevolking-behoort-niet-tot-religieuze-groep; https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2020/religie-in-nederland.

[7] The term refers to different 'pillars' or subcultures, separated according to religious, ideological and political ideas, which together carry the Dutch state and society: orthodox Protestants and Catholics, as well as liberals and social democrats. See James Kennedy and Jan Zwemer, 'Religion in the Modern Netherlands and the Problems of Pluralism', *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 125, no. 2/3 (2010): 250f.

[8] James C. Kennedy, 'Recent Dutch Religious History and the Limits of Secularization', in *The Dutch and Their Gods: Secularization and Transformation of Religion in the Netherlands since 1950*, ed. Erik Sengers (Hilversum, The Netherlands: Uitg. Verloren, 2005), 34.

[9] Anton van Harskamp, *Het nieuw-religieuze verlangen* (Kampen: Kok, 2000); Anton van Harskamp, 'Simply Astounding. Ongoing Secularisation in the Netherlands?', in *The Dutch and Their Gods: Secularization and Transformation of Religion in the Netherlands since 1950*, ed. Erik Sengers (Hilversum, The Netherlands: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2005), 47.

[10] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2f.

'experience': modern Dutch people no longer have a 'naive' or direct experience of spiritual or divine presence in daily life, because of the 'disenchantment' of their world.[11]
The decay of 'institutional Christianity' does not mean that 'God left the Netherlands',[12] but indicates a profound transformation of the position of religion in society and how religion is lived and experienced.[13] This situation can be characterized as 'post-Christendom', in which religion has become a private affair and, in public life and the media, being secular is promoted as the default way of life. At the same time, non-Christians may value Christian churches and organizations because of the social cohesion they offer to society by defending norms and values, being present at life events (marriages and funerals), for spiritual reflection and giving meaning to life ('*zingeving*'), as well as the broad involvement of church members in volunteer and social relief work in society.[14]
Also, the attitude of many Christians towards the church as an institution and 'normative' theology changed. The existence of manifold old and new churches suggests that even theologians have no clear idea about 'normative theology', so why would one join a church?[15] Religion is experienced as an individual choice.[16] De Hart and Van Houwelingen characterize this as 'modularization': people choose or 'appropriate' religious ideas or practices that fit into their life and worldview.[17]
'Traditional' anchors, such as the authority of the Bible, church confessions and dogmas are of little relevance for late modern Dutch Christians. They accept doctrines that make sense to them, chose church activities they like and shape their Christian practices (such as prayer) privately. In line with Taylor and others, Van Harskamp notices that in today's Dutch religiosity the 'reflexive self' became central. People feel that 'their religious life has to be an authentic expression of their own inner "self"'.[18] Religious beliefs and practices should stimulate the personal experiences of the religious individual.[19] This development fits into the broader contemporary Dutch context, which focuses on

[11] Charles Taylor, 'Buffered and Porous Selves', *The Immanent Frame. Secularism, Religion and the Public Sphere*, 2 September 2008, https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/09/02/buffered-and-porous-selves/. See for a characterization of secularization also: Stefan Paas, 'Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe: Towards the Interaction of Missiology and the Social Sciences', *Mission Studies* 28, no. 1 (2011): 7f. Paas mentions the following points: differentiation in society; privatization of religion; rationalization; pluralization and individual loss of faith.
[12] Joris Kregting, et al., 'Why God Has Left the Netherlands: Explanations for the Decline of Institutional Christianity in the Netherlands Between 1966 and 2015', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 1 (2018): 58–79.
[13] Kennedy, 'Recent Dutch Religious History'; Kennedy and Zwemer, 'Religion in the Modern Netherlands'.
[14] Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 'Religie aan het begin van de 21ste eeuw' (The Hague: CBS, 2009), 47f, https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/publicatie/2009/31/religie-aan-het-begin-van-de-21ste-eeuw; Hanneke Posthumus, Josje den Ridder, and Joep de Hart, 'Verenigd in verandering. Grote maatschappelijke organisaties en ontwikkelingen in de Nederlandse civil society', *Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau*, 2014, 38f; 143, https://adoc.pub/verenigd-in-verandering.html; De Hart and Van Houwelingen, *Christenen in Nederland. Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke gelovigheid*, 94f; Ton Bernts, Joantine Berghuijs, and Joep de Hart, *God in Nederland, 1966-2015* (Kampen: Ten Have, 2016), 44f.
[15] Based on comments by Henk Geertsema in a personal conversation 07-09-2022.
[16] Joep de Hart, *Maak het nieuw! Over religieuze ontwikkelingen en de positie van de kerken: een persoonlijke geschiedenis* (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2011), 28; Kregting et al., 'Why God Has Left the Netherlands', 60; Stefan Paas, 'Missionary Ecclesiology in an Age of Individualization', *Calvin Theological Journal* 48 (2013): 92.
[17] De Hart and Van Houwelingen, *Christenen in Nederland. Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke gelovigheid*, 44f. Miranda Klaver, Stefan Paas, and Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman (eds), *Evangelicals and Sources of Authority*, Amsterdam Studies in Theology and Religion (AmSTaR) 6 (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 2016), 2ff.
[18] Van Harskamp, 'Simply Astounding', 47f. Taylor discusses this as the 'Age of Authenticity': Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 486f.
[19] Stefan Paas, 'Ecclesiology in Context: Urban Church Planting in the Netherlands', in *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Essays Under the Auspices of the Center of Evangelical and Reformation Theology (CERT)*, eds C. van der Kooi, E. van Staalduijne-Sulman, and A.W. Zwiep, AmSTaR, No. 1 (Amsterdam, 2012), 135.

authenticity and spirituality, not governed by outer authorities but by personal feelings. Kennedy characterizes this as 'religion as individual spirituality'.[20] Young people in particular often join a church, not for denominational or theological reasons, but because of other priorities, such as geographical distance, liturgy, activities for children, etcetera. In short: religion and churches are not disappearing, but boundaries and distinctions are becoming blurred.[21]
In the last decades, there are also other demographic shifts in Dutch religiosity. To name an example, around 1.2 million Christian migrants arrived, who often worship in one of the more than 1000 migrant churches.[22] Many other migrants adhere to non-Christian religions, particularly Islam.[23]

Religious affiliation	Percentage	Percentage (partly)	Percentage (partly)
Total	100		
None	53.0		
Christian	39.4		
Roman-Catholic		20.3	
Protestant		15.0	
Protestant Church (PKN)			9.0
RCN			1.1
Other Reformed churches			2.2
Evangelical churches			1.5
Other Christian		1.7	
Islam	4.3		
Jewish	0.1		
Hindu	0.5		
Buddhist	0.6		
Other	2.1		

Table 5 Religions The Netherlands[24]

[20] Kennedy, 'Recent Dutch Religious History and the Limits of Secularization', 37f; See also: Van Harskamp, 'Simply Astounding', 50; Joep de Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen. Oude religie en nieuwe spiritualiteit*, 2nd ed. (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2013).
[21] Bernts, Berghuijs, and De Hart, *God in Nederland, 1966-2015*, 132f; De Hart and Van Houwelingen, *Christenen in Nederland. Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke gelovigheid*, 144f.
[22] De Hart and Van Houwelingen, *Christenen in Nederland. Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke gelovigheid*, 103.
[23] Willem Huijnk, 'De religieuze beleving van moslims in Nederland. Diversiteit en verandering in beeld' (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2018), https://www.scp.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2018/06/07/de-religieuze-beleving-van-moslims-in-nederland.
[24] Based on data from CBS: https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2020/religie-in-nederland/4-diversiteit-religieuze-stromingen.

5.2. Cultural-Religious Context — Evangelicalism[25]

Globally, the often rational inclination of Protestantism is giving way to a more expressive and experiential mode of faith, as is visible in the rapid spread of the Evangelical-Pentecostal movement.[26] Historically speaking, Evangelicalism was typically a reaction against passivity, moral laxity and a lack of missionary zeal in the mainstream churches and 'accompanied' the larger denominations (for example, in 18th and 19th century Pietism and the Revival movements). Evangelicalism in the Netherlands today is also influential, because it appeals to the desire for an 'individual spirituality', which is characteristic of today's Dutch context, and it shows an openness to the Dutch postmodern context and lifestyle.[27] I mention some characteristics, which are important for understanding the context of the current spirituality in the RCN and the way in which infant baptism is appropriated:

- not the church, but the personal commitment of the believer takes the centre stage ('not a religion but a relationship'), which fits in with our late modern/postmodern age, where 'religious authority' has shifted from the institution with its offices and confessions, to the individual, with its convictions and desires: 'believers gather their exegesis, theology and application from an increasingly fragmented field of voices', and compose their image of God and their worldview;[28]
- the congregation should be a warm and loving community, with a high degree of involvement of all members ('priesthood of all believers'), often with a strong leader and little attention to formal structures;[29]
- a 'more modern' way of being a church with new forms (cell groups; prayer groups; use of modern media in worship and online);[30]
- evangelicalism introduced a new worship style (songs — *Opwekking* [Revival]; musical instruments and style; embodiment), which strongly influenced the worship of mainstream churches as well;[31]
- longing for an immediate experience of God's presence in one's life;[32]
- attention to the work of the Holy Spirit in personal fellowship with God (prayer; personal revelations or messages from God; glossolalia; healing; miracles);
- the importance of the believer's personal choice for Jesus and a 'personal relationship with God or Jesus' and 'being God's beloved child';

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[25] I use the words 'evangelicalism' and 'evangelical' for the broad spectre of 'neo-Protestant' believers, groups and churches, both charismatic and non-charismatic, in separate evangelical churches or members in mainline or other churches. See for broader characterizations: David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989); M. Klaver, 'Hartstochtelijk Protestantisme. Bronnen en kenmerken van de evangelische beweging in Nederland', *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 50, no. 4 (2010): 385–400.

[26] Klaver, *This Is My Desire*, 19f.

[27] See Kennedy, 'Recent Dutch Religious History and the Limits of Secularization', 37f; See also: van Harskamp, 'Simply Astounding', 50; De Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen*.

[28] Klaver, Paas, and Van Staalduine-Sulman, *Evangelicals and Sources of Authority*, 2. Also: Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, 10th ed (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), ch. 11.

[29] Klaver, 'Hartstochtelijk protestantisme', 7.

[30] Paas, 'Ecclesiology in Context', 139f; E. van Staalduine-Sulman, 'The Evangelical Movement and the Enlightenment', in *Evangelicals and Sources of Authority*, ed. Miranda Klaver, Stefan Paas, and Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman, Amsterdam Studies in Theology and Religion (AmSTaR) 6 (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 2016), 51f.

[31] Miranda Klaver and Roeland, Johan H., 'Protestantisme in beweging: Evangelisch en reformatorisch in vijf vergelijkingen', in *Evangelisch en reformatorisch: Een wereld van verschil?*, ed. Henk van den Belt (Kampen, the Netherlands: De Groot Goudriaan, 2010), 44f.

[32] J. H. Roeland, *Selfation: Dutch Evangelical Youth Between Subjectivization and Subjection* (VU University Amsterdam, 2009), 34f; Pieter R. Boersema, 'The Evangelical Movement in The Netherlands. New Wine in New Wineskins?', in *The Dutch and Their Gods: Secularization and Transformation of Religion in the Netherlands since 1950*, ed. Erik Sengers (Hilversum, The Netherlands: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2005), 172f.

- emphasis on a subjective experience of faith (ministry prayer, for example), and a search for an 'authentic' faith ('God's unique plan for your life');[33]
- mostly orthodox in its theology (importance of Scripture, salvation through Christ alone) and thus also attractive for members of conservative Reformed churches;[34]
- depillarization and secularization foster a growing awareness of an 'ecumenicity of the heart' (Arie van der Veer). Through the Evangelical Broadcasting Company (*Evangelische Omroep*), Youth for Christ, the Alpha Course and New Wine conferences, the Reformed churches have also experienced a growing influence from evangelicalism.

We could say that the Dutch and Western desire for experience is the channel through which evangelicalism flows. The evangelical theologian Krol remarks: 'You can see this change as a movement from objective to subjective, from collective to individual, from knowledge to feeling, from formal to informal and from internally to an externally oriented. In this way, this fits into the overall picture of these times, because we observe these types of shifts in the whole of culture.'[35]

5.3. Reformed Churches in the Netherlands — a Short Historical Overview

From the Reformation up to 1796, the historical Reformed church ('*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*') was the only publicly recognized church in Dutch society. The Reformed pastors and theologians all subscribed to the 'Three Forms of Unity',[36] but there was considerable theological diversity among them, for example, concerning the understanding of the covenant and the meaning of infant baptism.[37] In the 19th century, the national *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* became a civilizing instrument for the Dutch government, which strived for a 'baptized nation' in which church and state are intertwined. For example, according to the state, the church did not have the right to deny the baptism of children of nominal Christians. This was one of the reasons leading to the Secession (*Afscheiding*) in 1834.[38] Another major church split in the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* took place in 1886, the '*Doleantie'*, led by Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). A unification with the earlier Secessionists took place in 1892 ('*Vereniging'*), from which the *Gereformeerde kerken* emerged.[39] In 1944, a church split in the *Gereformeerde Kerken* ('*Vrijmaking*' or 'liberation'[40]) led to the birth of the *Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt),* the current RCN.[41] The leading theologian of the new Reformed churches was Klaas Schilder (1890-1952), professor of dogmatics at the Theological School

[33] Klaver, Paas, and Van Staalduine-Sulman, *Evangelicals and Sources of Authority*, 5.

[34] Bram Krol, 'Evangelicalen en de kerk', *Radix* 27, no. 4 (2001): 229–32.

[35] '*Je kunt die verandering zien als een beweging van objectief naar subjectief, van collectief naar individueel, van kennis naar voelen, van formeel naar informeel en van intern naar extern gericht. Daarmee past dat ook in het totale tijdsbeeld, want in de hele cultuur zien we dat soort verschuivingen.*' Ibid., 230. Also: Klaver, Paas, and Van Staalduine-Sulman, *Evangelicals and Sources of Authority*, 5.

[36] Office bearers in the *Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt)* subscribe to: Belgic Confession (1561); Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and Canons of Dordt (1618-1619).

[37] E. Smilde, *Een eeuw strijd over verbond en kerk* (Kampen, the Netherlands: J.H. Kok, 1946); C. Graafland, 'De doop als splijtzwam in de gereformeerde gezindte', in *Rondom de doopvont: leer en gebruik van de heilige doop in het Nieuwe Testament en in de geschiedenis van de kerk*, ed. W. van 't Spijker et al. (Goudriaan: De Groot, 1983), 446–96; J. van Genderen, *Covenant and Election* (Alberta, Canada; Iowa, U.S.A: Inheritance Pub, 1995).

[38] A. de Groot and P.L. Schram (eds), *Aspecten van de Afscheiding* (Franeker: Wever, 1984); D. Deddens and J. Kamphuis, eds, *Afscheiding - Wederkeer. Opstellen over de Afscheiding van 1834* (Haarlem: Vijlbrief, 1984).

[39] Not all Secessionists joined the new *Gereformeerde kerken*: a substantial group continued as *Christelijke Gereformeerde kerk*, which still exists today.

[40] 'Liberation' refers here to 'free from the decisions of the Synod, which were seen as unlawful, binding pastors and professors to, for example, the teaching of 'presumptive regeneration'.

[41] 'Gereformeerde kerken in Nederland (vrijgemaakt)'. Around 80.000 members left, with more than 140 pastors among them. See for a broad overview: M. te Velde and D. Deddens (eds), *Vrijmaking–Wederkeer: vijftig jaar vrijmaking in beeld gebracht, 1944-1994* (Barneveld, Nederland: De Vuurbaak, 1994).

in Kampen.[42] Schilder, and others, resisted a subjective spirituality and pietist mysticism and stressed instead the trustworthiness of God's promises in the Covenant. This had a direct impact on the understanding of infant baptism: not the 'subjective' spiritual status of the child (presumed regeneration), but God's 'objective' covenantal promises are sealed in infant baptism.[43]
Schilder revived the idea of the 'antithesis'[44] and claimed the authority of Christ in all aspects of life and culture: the holiness of God requires full dedication to Him in family, church and society: all or nothing ('*alles of niets*'). This resulted in ecumenical and social isolation of the RCN, which also caused serious opposition in the church and became one of the reasons for another church split in 1967.[45] The RCN had become a closed pillar, driven by an activist 'ongoing reformation' in all areas of life: not only were there Reformed Bible study groups but many Reformed institutions were established, like a Theological School, elementary schools and high schools, a daily journal, a political party, social organizations or clubs, a broadcast society and limited ecumenical contacts (at first mostly only with RCN emigrant churches).[46] There was often a triumphalist attitude in the RCN of being the one and only 'true church'.[47] Baptismal services were, first of all, for the parents and the congregation. Family members were welcome, but inviting non-Christians was exceptional, because of the closed character of the RCN.[48]
In the course of the 1980s onward, the 'isolated' RCN opened up to the surrounding world. A new generation of Reformed intellectuals interacted with other Christian and non-Christian scholars. This became visible, for example, in the critical historical reflections on the Reformed past and present by Harinck and others.[49] A much more open attitude toward other Christians, especially the Evangelical Movement, emerged and most RCN organizations opened their doors to other Christians.[50]

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[42] See on Schilder: Marius van Rijswijk et al. (eds), *Wie is die man? Klaas Schilder in de eenentwintigste eeuw* (Barneveld, Nederland: Vuurbaak, 2012).
[43] M. te Velde, 'Vernieuwing en conflict in de jaren dertig', in *Vrijmaking–Wederkeer: vijftig jaar vrijmaking in beeld gebracht, 1944-1994*, ed. M. te Velde and D. Deddens (Barneveld, Nederland: De Vuurbaak, 1994), 25–38; George Harinck, *De Reformatie. Weekblad tot ontwikkeling van het gereformeerde leven 1920-1940* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1993).
[44] Gerrit Glas, 'Mentaliteit. Een korte peiling', in *1944 en vervolgens. Tien maal over vijftig jaar Vrijmaking*, eds G. Harinck and M. te Velde (Barneveld, Nederland: De Vuurbaak, 1994), 52–57; Koert van Bekkum, ed., *Proeven van spiritualiteit: bijdragen ter gelegenheid van 160 jaar Theologische Universiteit Kampen* (Barneveld, Nederland: Vuurbaak, 2014), 133f.
[45] '*In het isolement ligt onze kracht*'. Kennedy speaks about a 'self-chosen organized isolation': Kennedy, 'Kerk als tegencultuur', 315.
[46] R. Kuiper, 'Vrijmaking of wederkeer', in *Vuur en vlam 1. Aspecten van het vrijgemaakt-gereformeerde leven, 1944-1969.*, eds R. Kuiper and W. Bouwman (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1994), 17f; See for a broad overview of 'vrijgemaakte' organisations: R. Kuiper and W. Bouwman (eds), *Vuur en vlam 2. De organisatie van het vrijgemaakt-gereformeerde leven 1944-1994.* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1998).
[47] Kuiper, 'Slotbeschouwing', 368f; Kuiper, 'Vrijmaking', 19; Marinus de Jong, 'Houden van beton', in *Gereformeerde theologie stroomopwaarts. Terugkijken op 75 jaar vrijmaking*, eds Erik de Boer, Dolf te Velde, and Geranne Tamminga (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn Motief, 2021), 167–76.
[48] Van der Laan mentions the baptismal service as one of the missed missionary chances for the RCN and suggests inviting non-Christian friends as well: Peter H. van der Laan, *Eenmaal gedoopt* (Barneveld, Nederland: Vuurbaak, 1998), 166f.
[49] George Harinck, Herman Paul, and Bart Wallet (eds), *Het gereformeerde geheugen: protestantse herinneringsculturen in Nederland, 1850-2000* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2009). See for a broader reflection: Koert van Bekkum, 'Verlangen naar tastbare genade: achtergrond, geschiedenis en typologie van spiritualiteit in de Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt)', in *Proeven van spiritualiteit: bijdragen ter gelegenheid van 160 jaar Theologische Universiteit Kampen*, ed. Koert van Bekkum (Barneveld, Nederland: Vuurbaak, 2014), 131–57.
[50] Kennedy, 'Kerk als tegencultuur', 318.

5.4. Description and Analysis of the Field Research

The field research in the Netherlands was conducted between October 2019 and January 2020 by doing interviews with pastors, elders, a deacon and congregation members in the Netherlands. Respondents came from three RCN congregations, situated in (1) a small town, (2) a village and (3) an urban context, in different parts of the Netherlands. Other than in the Indian and Malawian context, the Netherlands has had several pastors and theologians recently publishing on the meaning of infant baptism. For the description of the formal theological voice, this was an extra source of information. In addition, RCN congregation members sometimes give testimony during the baptismal service of their child, which serves as additional data for the espoused voice of theology.[51] The interviews were, with one exception, conducted in the homes of the respondents, who were typically very open to speaking about- the practice and appropriation of infant baptism. While interviewees felt free to speak, some indicated that they did not often think about infant baptism and were searching for the best way to express themselves. With one exception, all interviews with congregation members were done with the wife and the husband separately.

5.4.1. Research Population

Firstly, I sent letters to the church council to request permission for my research. In each case, the pastor was entrusted with suggesting names of respondents, which were then contacted by him in advance, and subsequently by me.

Three pastors and three members of the church council and a youth teacher were interviewed. Ten couples and a mother were interviewed, most of them with younger children. Apart from the pastors, the interviewees were from different socio-economic backgrounds, with jobs, for example, in education, IT, administration, business, social work or homework.

Most of the interviewees have their family roots in the RCN, but some originally came from other Protestant churches, one from a Roman Catholic background, while some had no church affiliation in their youth. Those who joined the church later did so typically because of their marriage to a church member.

Background / Age	Pastors / elders / deacons	Ord. Believer Female	Ord. Believer Male	Total
RCN	5	9	9	23
Protestant / Evangelical	1		1	2
RCC	1			1
No religious affiliation		1	1	2
20+		3	3	6
30+	3	8	7	18
40+	4			4

Table 6 Overview Respondents RCN The Netherlands

5.4.2. Language

All interviews were conducted in Dutch and Dutch written sources were used. Unless otherwise indicated, the Dutch citations in this chapter have been translated into English by the researcher, with the Dutch original in the footnotes or brackets.

[51] For example: E-185; testimony parents / E-186; testimony parents / E-187; testimony parents.

5.5. Appropriation of Infant Baptism in the RCN

In the Dutch Reformed tradition, there have always been discussions about the relationship between the promises of God in the Word and the sacraments and the 'appropriation' ('*toeëigening*') of God's promises through the Holy Spirit. Next to this, the relation between the (outer) visible act of infant baptism and the (inner) invisible regeneration through the Holy Spirit was often discussed.[52]

Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) reinvigorated the idea of presumptive regeneration: all who are baptized must be considered as elected and regenerated until the opposite becomes evident. In the debates about covenant and election, Schilder and others pleaded — with reference to John Calvin — for a renewed focus on God's covenantal promise,[53] not as a prediction about the election or presumptive regeneration, but as a call to faith and repentance.[54] The theological disagreement on this topic was one of the reasons for the schism in 1944, which led to the birth of the RCN.[55]

Today, infant baptism is being discussed again in several RCN congregations. This discussion is triggered by the practice of adult baptism in Evangelical churches, but also fits into the Dutch individualistic context. The shift of religious authority to the individual and the longing for 'experience' (as described above) results in a growing number of parents in the RCN no longer seeing infant baptism as the default but as an option.[56] However, the 2005 RCN synod expressed that infant baptism is the fundamental sign of membership and no provisions for infant dedication were made, even though local churches can make regulations for specific situations.[57] The synod also approved three new baptismal forms, the second of which was designed with the challenge of the evangelical movement in mind.[58] In the past, the acceptance of infant baptism was a criterion for full church membership, today this is no longer the case.[59] Some RCN members prefer adult baptism over infant baptism, but they do not see this as a reason to leave the church. Sometimes, adults have themselves rebaptized while remaining members of the RCN.[60]

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[52] J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant* (Launceston, Australia: Free Reformed Church Australia, 1985); C. Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Barth: oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de leer der verkiezing in het gereformeerd protestantisme* ('s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1987); Graafland, 'De doop als splijtzwam in de gereformeerde gezindte'.

[53] E.g. J. Kamphuis, *Een eeuwig verbond* (Haarlem: Vijlbrief, 1984); Trimp, *Klank en weerklank*.

[54] Canons of Dordt, II.5. In this paragraph I use insights from: Van Bekkum, 'Verlangen', 141f. Kamphuis, *Een eeuwig verbond*; and: Dolf te Velde, 'Belofte en sacrament', in *Gereformeerde theologie stroomopwaarts. Terugkijken op 75 jaar vrijmaking*, ed. Erik de Boer, Dolf te Velde, and Geranne Tamminga (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn Motief, 2021), 95–107.

[55] te Velde, 'Vernieuwing en conflict in de jaren dertig'. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant*; te Velde, 'Belofte en sacrament'.

[56] Hans Schaeffer, 'Doop en keuzekerk', *Kontekstueel* 27, no. 5 (2013); M. Klaver, 'Van besprenkeling naar onderdompeling, een antropologische kijk op doopritueIen', *Kerk en Theologie* 63, no. 4 (2012): 345–56, https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/van-besprenkeling-naar-onderdompeling-een-antropologische-kijk-op.

[57] This will remain the case in the future church order of the DRC-RCN: Werkgroep Toekomstige Kerkorde, 'Toelichting 1 - Kerkorde GKv-NGK 2020' (Regiegroep NGK-GKv, 2020), 29–30, https://onderwegnaar1kerk.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/200908-Toelichting-1-Interactieve-tekst-def.pdf.

[58] Acta van de Generale Synode Amersfoort-Centrum 2005 van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland Hoofdstuk V Eredienst, p. 13-14 (https://www.gkv.nl/downloads/6055/acta2005_05_Eredienst.pdf - accessed 29-04-2021); 'Acta Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland: Amersfoort-Centrum. Deputatenrapport Eredienst. Bijlage V - IX', 2005, 61.64, https://www.gkv.nl/downloads/6089/acta2005_b0509_deputatenrapport_eredienst.pdf. - accessed 29-04-2021. The later synods of 2011 (Harderwijk) and 2014 (Ede) finalized the redaction.

[59] Eline Kuijper, 'Gertjan Oosterhuis onderzocht "uittochten": "Je kunt vrijgemaakt blijven en evangelisch worden"', *Nederlands Dagblad*, 21 August 2021, https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/1056949/gerjan-oosterhuis-onderzocht-uittochten-je-kunt-vrijgemaakt-bli.

[60] The Synod of Harderwijk (2011) states that 'rebaptism' is unbiblical, but those who desire rebaptism as adults and want to remain church member are not (automatically) excluded -

In the following section, I will describe the appropriation of infant baptism in RCN, based on field research and written sources, such as baptismal forms. The description of each aspect of appropriation (BBBE-model: 'believing—belonging—behaving—experiencing') is followed by reflections on the relation of the appropriation to the Dutch socio-religious context. In general, the interviewees have a positive attitude towards infant baptism, but in so far as it was brought up by the interviewees, I also pay attention to the questions about adult baptism and child dedication.

5.5.1. Believing

In this paragraph, I discuss 'believing' as an aspect of the appropriation of infant baptism. In the interviews, I asked questions such as: What does the baptismal water refer to? Is there an effect of infant baptism on parents and children? Is there a relationship between infant baptism and salvation?

The 'normative theology' of the ordinary believers was visible in the references they made to Scripture and the baptismal forms. Among the interviewees, the story about the circumcision of Abraham and his house and the making of the covenant, as well as the baptism of Jesus are mentioned most frequently, followed by the story of Jesus blessing the children. Three parents mentioned that circumcision is replaced by baptism in the New Testament.[61] One parent referred to the book of Acts, where converts are baptized with their house.[62] Romans 6 was indirectly referred to by all three pastors and an elder.[63] When speaking about original sin, two parents referred to Adam and Eve.[64]

5.5.1.1. Trust in a Loving Father and Good Creator

'God takes care of you, but yeah, He is also the almighty and great God, He governs the world. It is kind of a double feeling: on one hand, you have a strong God, but He is also a caring Father. And what I feel very strongly is that He is in control. (…) We sometimes don't know how things will go, but then you can trust that God will arrange and lead everything. In the end, it will be for our good.' (E-180:1; mother; 20+)[65]

Nearly all Dutch parents and office bearers agree that infant baptism signifies the presence of a loving God and Father in their lives. This provides a feeling of confidence and safety: God is present in daily life, He watches over every step and people believe that God loves them and listens when they pray.[66] Most interviewees call God 'Father',[67] while some others prefer an (according to themselves more intimate expression) of a 'Friend'.[68] Some parents speak about a 'double feeling':

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http://www.kerkrecht.nl/node/3701. See also: Miranda Klaver, 'From Sprinkling to Immersion: Conversion and Baptism in Dutch Evangelicalism', *Ethnos* 76, no. 4 (2011): 474.

[61] F-176:10; elder; 40+ / E-180:10; mother; 20+ / E-184:13; father; 30+.

[62] F-176:10; elder; 40+.

[63] F-165:21; pastor; 60+ / F-176:9; elder; 40+ / F-178:11; pastor; 30+ / F-189:8; pastor; 50+.

[64] E-171:13; mother; 30+ / E-182:6; father; 30+.

[65] '*God zorgt voor je, maar het is ook, ja, Hij is de machtige grote God, almachtig, en Hij leidt de wereld… Het is een beetje dat tweeledige dat je aan de ene kant God gewoon als een machtige God hebt, maar ook als een zorgende Vader. En wat, wat voor mij wel heel sterk is, is dat Hij de leiding heeft. (…) Wij weten soms niet altijd hoe het loopt, maar je mag er dan op vertrouwen dat God dat zal regelen en leiden. Dat het uiteindelijk ten goede komt.'* See also: E-159:22; mother; 20+ / E-161:2; mother; 30+.

[66] E-158:1; father; 20+ / E-162:21; mother; 30+ / E-163:1.4; father; 30+ / E-169:1; mother; 30+ / E-171:1; mother; 30+ / E-173:2; father; 30+ / F-178:2; pastor; 30+ / E-183:1; mother; 30+.

[67] E-163:3; father; 30+ / E-168:4; father; 30+ / E-173:4; father; 30+ / F-176:1; elder; 40+ / E-179:7; father; 20+ / E-186:2-3; testimony parents.

[68] E-162:4; mother; 30+. Comparable: Bosman, *Celebrating the Lord's Supper in the Netherlands. A Study of Liturgical Ritual Practices in Dutch Reformed Churches*, 87.

on the one hand, God is a Friend they can always trust and who always forgives, on the other hand, He is a King, and we must obey his rules.[69]
Infant baptism is, in the first place, understood as a sign of God's love: He has a plan for our lives, He loves His children and He is always there for them.[70] Parents trust that God, as the Creator, will not desert their children. A church elder witnesses: *'For me, it is a beautiful thing to know that I have an eternal future together with our Father and to know that He really loves me more than I can imagine, (…) because I actually rather see myself as somebody who is not really fitting to God. And then to realise that God promises me that He loves me as if, as if I am already totally good.' (F-176:1; elder; 40+).*[71]
Secondly, baptism also expresses the thankfulness of the parents and the congregation to God, as the Creator, for the gift of new life. This is also clear from some testimonies the parents gave during the baptismal services.[72] God's care and protection do not imply that God keeps away all kinds of evil or illness from the child, but that He never leaves it alone and is present, also in difficult times. This gives hope and trust to the parents: God is always there and even if a child strolls away from God, it can always return.[73] Parents and pastors shared this conviction, but only half of the parents relate this directly to infant baptism, while others see this as a 'general truth'.[74]

5.5.1.2. Born in Sin?

'Of course, according to the baptismal form (it) is just the washing away of sin, so to say – even though the child is very small it has, this child is just conceived and born in sin, so to say, and … that the water washes the sin away and the child becomes clean. (…) Yes, I find, I find this very complicated. The child, yeah, the child doesn't understand anything. Did it actually already do wrong things?'[75] (E-183:8; mother; 30+).
Most parents state that they believe children are born in sin.[76] Often they distinguish actual sin (which cannot be attributed to a baby) from 'original sin', the sinful 'status' of the child because of Adam's sin or the sinful existence in which all humans find themselves.[77] Some parents understand the washing of sin in infant baptism as only pointing to future forgiveness: the little child has not done any sin yet, but in future it will surely do so and the baptismal water shows that God will be ready to forgive future sin.[78]

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[69] E-158:1; father; 20+ / E-162:2; mother; 30+.
[70] E-177:8; mother; 30+ / E-179:11; father; 20+ / E-181:1-2; mother; 30+.
[71] '*Voor mij wel een mooi punt is, te weten dat ik een, een eeuwige toekomst heb, samen met onze Vader, en daarbij te weten dat Hij echt veel meer van me houdt dan ik kan voorstellen. (…) omdat ik mezelf best wel, best wel zie als iemand die eigenlijk niet bij God zou passen. En, en dan te weten dat God mij belooft dat Hij zo van me houdt, alsof ik, alsof ik al helemaal goed ben.*' (F-176:1; elder; 40+).
[72] E-162:8; mother; 30+ / E-174:12; mother; 30+ / E-186:1; testimony parents / E-187:1-2; testimony parents.
[73] E-158:11; father; 20+ / E-161:7.18; mother; 30+ / E-162:14; mother; 30+ / F-164:5.14; deacon; 40+ / E-167:20; mother; 30+ / E-169:1.12; mother; 30+ / E-179:7; father; 20+ / E-181:18; mother; 30+ / E-183:6; mother; 30+.
[74] E-160:12; father; 30+ / E-168:8; father; 30+ / E-173:16; father; 30+.
[75] 'N*atuurlijk volgens formulier is gewoon het, het afwassen van zonde zeg maar, ook al is het heel klein, het heeft, dit, dit kind is gewoon in zonde ontvangen, zeg maar, en... dat wordt dan door het water wordt die zonde gewoon afgewassen en wordt het kind rein. (…) Ja, ik vind dat, ik vind dat heel ingewikkeld. Het kind, ja, het kind heeft, dat weet nog van niks. Heeft dat dan inderdaad al verkeerde dingen gedaan?*' (E-183:8; mother; 30+).
[76] 12 parents clearly accept original sin, 4 parents doubt or reject it, 3 parents have no opinion.
[77] E-158.9; father; 20+ / E-159:6.9; mother; 20+ / F-166:13; elder; 40+ / E-167:16.18; mother; 30+ / E-170:8; father; 30+ / E-171:13; mother; 30+ / F-172:8; teacher 30+ / F-175:8; deacon; 30+ / F-176:1; elder; 40+ / E-177:10; mother; 30+ / E-179:9; father; 20+ / E-180:4; mother; 20+ / E-181:19; mother; 30+.
[78] E-161:9.19; mother; 30+ / E-163:17; father; 30+ / E-168:6; father; 30+ / E-169:14; mother; 30+ / E-181:19; mother; 30+ / E-184:2.6; father; 30+ / E-186:2-3; testimony parents.

Many interviewees have questions about the teaching of original sin. Several parents say that they understand the teaching of the fallen state of humanity at an intellectual level, but the question in the baptismal forms is experienced as very strong: '*Do you confess that N.N, came sinful and guilty into this world, and is therefore subject to all sorts of misery, even to eternal condemnation, but is even so sanctified in Christ?*'.[79]
One reason for feeling uneasy about original sin is that parents are afraid that non-Reformed or non-Christian family members or friends invited to the baptismal service will not appreciate the baptismal question about sin.[80] A mother shares: '*I still remember very well the passage, where it says that we are born in sin, and that the person who did not believe really had an issue with this, like: how is it possible that such small helpless creatures are therefore apparently born in sin? (…) I understood her statement as "I hear this in a baptismal service and it really only confirms what I already thought of the church" (E-181:11; mother; 30+).*[81]
In short, the understanding of the relationship between original sin and infant baptism as expressed in baptismal forms has become problematic for many respondents. At the request of the parents, pastors often anticipate the presence of non-RCN guests in a baptismal service and 'cushion' the explanation of the sinfulness of a child to avoid offending formulations.[82] Several local churches use additional or adapted baptismal questions, such as.: *'Your children are, each and every one, beautiful and unique creatures of God. However, they are born in a world where sin and brokenness reign and they are unknowingly participating in this. Without Christ, their lives would have no future. Do you believe with all your heart that your children are holy before God, because of the sacrifice of Christ?.'*[83]
In this way, pastors and churches ease the tension between normative and espoused theology regarding the relation between 'original sin' and infant baptism.

5.5.1.3. The Sign of Water

Father: I would have no idea, what I should then think of, so to say ….
Interviewer: Well, water is about washing and such…
Father: No. It is also about swimming and… it is also about drinking… (E-170:14; father; 30+)[84]

All interviewees mention, in one way or another, that Christ restores the relationship between God and humans by forgiving sin. However, the relationship with (infant) baptism does not always seem clear to them. For only half of the parents 'water' refers symbolically to the washing of sin and a sign

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[79] '*Erkent u dat N.N. zondig en schuldig ter wereld is gekomen en daarom aan allerlei ellende en zelfs aan het eeuwig oordeel onderworpen is, maar dat (hij) toch in Christus voor God heilig is'* - E-167:16; mother; 30+ / E-169:19; mother; 30+ / E-173:17; father; 30+ / F-189:10; pastor; 50+.
[80] E-173:10; father; 30+ / E-184:7; father; 30+.
[81] *'Ik me nog heel goed herinneren dat het stukje, dat we in zonde geboren zijn benoemd werd, en dat degene die niet gelovig was daar heel erg over viel, zoiets had van maar hoe kan het dan dat zulke kleine hulpeloze wezentjes dus blijkbaar in zonde geboren zijn? Ze hebben toch nog niks fout gedaan? (…) Ik voelde wel zo'n statement van: nu hoor ik dit dan in die doopdienst, en dat bevestigt eigenlijk alleen maar wat ik al eerder bedacht had over de kerk.' (*E-181:11; mother; 30+).
[82] E-181:7; mother; 30+ / E-183:4; mother; 30+ / F-189:11; pastor; 50+.
[83] '*Jullie kinderen zijn een voor een prachtige en unieke schepsels van God! Maar ze zijn geboren in een wereld waar zonde en gebrokenheid heersen en daar hebben ze zonder het te weten ook deel aan. Zonder Christus zou hun leven geen toekomst hebben. Geloven jullie van harte dat jullie kinderen dankzij het offer van Christus voor God heilig zijn?'* This baptismal form is used in Zwolle (Plantagekerk) but also in some other churches: https://plantagekerkzwolle.nl/kerkdiensten/doop/.
[84] *Respondent: 'Ik zou ook niet weten waar ik dan aan zou moeten denken, zeg maar…*
interviewer: nou ja, water gaat natuurlijk over wassen en zo…
respondent: Nee. Het gaat ook over zwemmen en… Het gaat ook over drinken.' (E-170:14; father; 30+) See also: E-163:9; father; 30+ / E-173:1; father; 30+ / E-182:13; father; 30+.

of (future) forgiveness.[85] Some say that because John the Baptist was using water and Jesus was also baptized with water, we should also use water.[86] Some parents indicate that they had never thought about the meaning of using water in baptism and understand it as a random element, which could eventually be missed.[87]
Another observation is that the relation between the outer washing with water and the inner washing from sin 'by the blood of Christ' and through the Spirit of Christ is mentioned only in one of the baptismal forms of the RCN.[88] The other forms speak about Jesus washing away 'your dirt' and 'taking away all your sin' (Form 1) and 'washing away sin because of his suffering and death' (Form 3).[89] The recent Dutch 'Ordinary Catechism', provides an extensive treatment of (infant) baptism and the need for cleansing of sin, but the reference to the washing with the blood of Christ is not used.[90] This is striking because the Heidelberg Catechism as used in the RCN mentions the parallel between the baptismal water and the washing with the blood of Christ seven times. In the interviews, the need for forgiveness of sin was mentioned regularly, but the parallel between the baptismal washing and the washing of the soul through the blood of Christ was not mentioned at all.

5.5.1.4. Renewed through the Holy Spirit?

The role of the Holy Spirit in infant baptism was mentioned by one elder, while a deacon denies any special activity of the Holy Spirit.[91] The pastors did not refer to the work of the Spirit, but some parents did. A father wonders if the Holy Spirit might give faith or new birth to the child at baptism: '*But I do think that something Holy Spirit-like is coming there on the child and starts to work with it. And that could be through our upbringing of the child. Eh, but it can surely also influence the thinking of the child and the… yes, we have no… we don't know that.'* (E-160:11; father; 30+)[92] A mother believes that the Holy Spirit will work in the heart of her child in future and give faith and let it grow.[93] Some parents refer explicitly to the help of the Holy Spirit in the upbringing of their children and give faith to the children.[94] Another interviewee denies that the Holy Spirit is descending during infant baptism,[95] and this opinion is shared by most of the parents: baptism is a visible sign of God's love, but there is no special activity of the Holy Spirit.
On the subject of the Holy Spirit, several parents also mention conversations with evangelical Christians. A mother says that some of her evangelical friends speak about the work of the Holy Spirit in the child and asked her '*whether the Holy Spirit is in your child'.* The mother reacts: *'I thought, "what sort of question is that?" I never thought about it (…) And, and that those friends were strongly praying for, that the Holy Spirit might work in their child. Yes, perhaps the Holy Spirit*

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[85] E-161:9.19; mother; 30+ / E-167:12; mother; 30+ / E-170:8; father; 30+ / E-171:17; mother; 30+ / F-172:11; teacher 30+ / F-176:22; elder; 40+ / F-189:15; pastor; 50+.
[86] F-164:10; deacon; 40+ / E-181:21; mother; 30+.
[87] E-160:12; father; 30+ / F-164:10; deacon; 40+ / E-169:14; mother; 30+. Twelve out of twenty parents understand 'water' as a cleansing of sin, five deny this and two have never thought about the symbolic meaning of water. A representative of formal theology denies that the water is about forgiveness. Two interviewees think that water is not indispensable for baptism.
[88] *Gereformeerd Kerkboek*, Gereformeerde kerken in Nederland (Heerenveen: Royal Jongbloed, 2017), 672.
[89] *Ibid., 668.672.678.*
[90] Pleizier, Huijgen, and te Velde, *Gewone Catechismus*, 30f.
[91] F-164:16; deacon; 40+ / F-176:19; elder; 40+.
[92] *'Maar ik denk zeker dat er in de vorm van de Heilige Geest-achtig iets dat daar op dat kind komt, dat ermee bezig gaat. En dat kan zijn door middel van ons door het opvoeden. Ehm, maar dat kan zeker ook zijn op dat kind qua denken en qua, ja, daar, daar hebben we geen… dat weten we niet* '(E-160:11; father; 30+).
[93] E-161:10.18; mother; 30+.
[94] E-158.7; father; 20+ (Spirit works faith in parents and makes them baptize the child); F-166:19; elder; 40+ (future work of Holy Spirit in the heart of child).
[95] F-164:16; deacon; 40+.

comes at baptism. Why wouldn't the Holy Spirit be in a baby? He is present in everything, but that is just something you don't think about or something…' (E-171:12; mother; 30+)[96]

5.5.2. Reflections — Believing and Infant Baptism in the Dutch Context

After describing the different theological voices on the 'believing' aspect of the appropriation of infant baptism, I will now reflect on some topics that were mentioned in the interviews.

5.5.2.1. Reflection 1 — Believing and Baptism in a Late Modern and Secularized Context

As described earlier: in (late-)modern Dutch society 'authenticity' and 'individual realization' are important. People must 'feel good', 'flourish', 'develop themselves' and 'do our own thing'.[97] The feeling of being a valuable creature who 'deserves' all kinds of luxury and wellness is widely promoted in the Dutch media. This perspective also influences the formal and espoused theology in the RCN.[98]

There seems to be a growing tendency to look at children, not so much as born in sin, but as precious 'pearls in God's hand'.[99] The anthropologist Lancy characterizes this tendency in the Western context as 'neontocracy', which sees children as '*precious, innocent and preternaturally cute cherubs'*.[100] In several RCN congregations, an adapted baptismal form is used in which the first question to the parents is: '*Do you believe in the welcome and care of God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth?'*[101]

In the Reformed confessions and the baptismal forms, there is a deep sense of standing before God as guilty sinners, who can contribute nothing to their salvation. There is also the conviction of '*sola gratia*', which makes grace an undeserved miracle from God. In a newspaper article, the RCN theologian De Bruijne stated that infant baptism cannot go together with the rejection of original sin.[102] The Protestant theologian Barnard also pointed out the theological incompatibility of the Reformed and Evangelical theology in this respect and cautioned that what he calls liturgical 'bricolage' has theological consequences.[103]

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[96] '*Of de Heilige Geest ook in je kind zit? Dacht wat is dat nou weer voor vraag, daar heb ik nog nooit over nagedacht. (…) En, en dat, dat die (vrienden) ook heel erg daarvoor, voor kunnen bidden, dat de Heilige Geest mag werken in hun kind. Ja, misschien komt de Heilige Geest wel bij de doop. Waarom zou de Heilige Geest eigenlijk niet in een, in een baby zitten? Hij zit eigenlijk overal in, maar daar ben je gewoon helemaal niet mee bezig of zo…'* (E-171:12; mother; 30+).

[97] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473f; J. van der Stoep, R. Kuiper, and T. Ramaker (eds), *Alles wat je hart begeert?* (Amsterdam, 2007). See also Jos Douma's analysis of 'millennials', where the same desire for authenticity surfaces: https://www.levenindekerk.nl/geloven-als-een-millennial/ (accessed 25-06-2021).

[98] See also: Bosman, *Celebrating the Lord's Supper in the Netherlands. A Study of Liturgical Ritual Practices in Dutch Reformed Churches*, 266.

[99] Reference to a well-known Christian song by Elly and Rikkert Zuiderveld, also used in baptismal services – Stichting Evangelisch Werkverband, *Evangelische liedbundel* (Zoetermeer, The Netherlands: Boekencentrum, 2008), no. 471.

[100] Cited with original emphasis by: Lydia van Leersum-Bekebrede et al., 'Deconstructing Ideals of Worship with Children', *Studia Liturgica* 49, no. 1 (1 March 2019): 85.

[101] '*1. Geloof je in het welkom en de zorg van God de Vader, de schepper van hemel en aarde?' (F-188:1; form)*

[102] A.L.Th. de Bruijne, 'Ons zicht op de doop is bedorven door lange traditie waarin doop vanzelfsprekend was', *Nederlands Dagblad*, 14 April 2018, https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/534684/opinie-de-erfzonde-kent-een-korte-route-die-van-ouders-naar-hun-kind.

[103] Marcel Barnard, 'Het heilige gebeurt niet. Een kritische plaatsbepaling van Gerrit Immink: Het heilige gebeurt', *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies* 28 (12 December 2012): 119, https://ugp.rug.nl/jvlo/article/view/4314. See also: Marcel Barnard, 'Bricolageliturgie. Liturgical Studies Revisited', in *God in een kantelende wereld: geloof en kerk in veranderende contexten*, eds F. Gerrit Immink and Cas J.A. Vos (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum Uitgevers, 2009), 310–25.

All this seems in line with what Taylor calls the late modern expressivist attitude, as well as with the relocation of authority in the individual believer. This becomes visible in a bricolage in baptismal theology and practice, a combination of 'formerly untenable positions':[104] Reformed aspects of baptism as expressed in the Reformed confessions and baptismal forms (God as the initiator of the covenant, original sin, predestination, forgiveness through the blood of Christ, need of renewal through the Holy Spirit) are not denied, but the focus moves to the celebration of a 'good' new life, in which God 'accepts the child as it is'.
An example of this expressivist attitude is the appropriation of the song for baptism by the music group Sela, which was very popular in the RCN in the period of our research. This song is suited to both infant and adult baptism and speaks about being united with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6), about forgiveness of sin and being freed from guilt and the chorus says: 'cleanse me, sanctify me'. However, while the song was often mentioned in the interviews, reminiscences of these phrases are missing. Instead, what is resonating with the parents is the phrase that the water of baptism gives us 'faith and hope that God's faithfulness and love always remain' that 'our life is safe' with God and that 'God's Name is attached to us forever'.[105] This use of the Sela song illustrates the process of appropriation well: certain theological elements, which are relevant for believers in their context, are embraced, while other elements are not explicitly denied, but do not function in the appropriation of the ordinary believers.[106]

5.5.2.2. Reflection 2 — Adoption as Being Accepted by a Loving Father

All parents believe that in infant baptism God says and signifies: 'This is my child'.[107] To many parents, the main idea of baptism is to thank God as the caring and loving Father, who accepts believers and their children, just as Jesus did.[108] A mother shares how she explains infant baptism to children: *'God is always there for you, in fact, you don't have to do anything for that. Because, yes, as a baby, you cannot do anything, and we still wanted to show with this sign: God is there for you and wants to be your Father. So, yes, even if things go badly with you and you don't even think about God, you should know that God does think about you.'*[109]
The notion of adoption by God as Father is deeply rooted in Reformational and RCN baptismal theology and spirituality. However, this notion was used in a Trinitarian setting and accompanied by attention to the atoning work of Christ and the need for rebirth through the Holy Spirit.[110] These last two elements are only scarcely present in the interviews.
This shows how the theology of infant baptism, as expressed in the Reformed confessions, is appropriated by ordinary believers. For most of them the notions of election, covenant, rebirth and original sin, are not just difficult to explain to non-Christians or non-Reformed family members and friends but do not seem to resonate with their own spiritual and theological 'needs' either, and consequently receive little to no attention.

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[104] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 513. See also: Van Harskamp, 'Simply Astounding', 47; Paas, 'Ecclesiology in Context', 135.
[105] '*Uit het water van de doop putten wij geloof en hoop dat Gods trouw en liefde blijvend is'; 'U verzegelt door de doop dat ons leven bij U veilig is'; 'dat Zijn Naam voorgoed aan ons verbonden is.'*
[106] Klaver, *This Is My Desire*, Ch. 6 and esp. pp. 206f. Taylor would call this 'expressive individualism'. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.
[107] F-166:5; elder; 40+ / E-173:7; father; 30+ / F-175:6; deacon; 30+ / F-176:6.18; elder; 40+ / E-177:11; mother; 30+ / E-179:6; father; 20+ / E-180:3; mother; 20+ / E-181:7; mother; 30+ / E-182:2; father; 30+.
[108] F-164:14; deacon; 40+ / F-165:7; pastor; 60+ / E-171:9; mother; 30+ / E-180:10; mother; 20+.
[109] '*God is er altijd voor jou, je hoeft daar niks voor te doen eigenlijk. Want ja, je was baby, je kan niks, en toch wilden we met dat teken laten zien van God die is er voor jou, die wil vader voor jou zijn. Dus ja, stel dat zelfs als het slecht gaat met je… en je misschien niet meer aan God denkt, weet dan dat God wél aan jou denkt.*` (E-169:7; mother; 30+).
[110] This is clear from the RCN baptismal forms and, e.g. Kamphuis, *Een eeuwig verbond*; C Trimp, 'The Sacrament of Baptism', trans. Nelson Kloosterman, *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 11 (2000): 87–146.

When listening to the pastors, we notice that they mention forgiveness and washing of sin in their teaching and preaching about infant baptism, but on the other hand, they also accommodate the changing spirituality of the church members and the Dutch context. An example is the addition of introductory phrases to the baptismal questions or the omission of expressions like 'washing through the blood of Christ'.[111]

This shift can, in the first place, be understood in the context of a 'positive anthropology' in Dutch secular society[112] as well as the influence of the Evangelical movement: 'People are invited as a beloved child of God to live in an intimate relationship with God.'[113] God is praised as 'loving' and 'caring', while other aspects of His character, such as his righteousness and exaltedness receive much less attention. Secondly, there is the influence of the anthropocentric focus in Evangelicalism, which leads to a therapeutic character of faith, in which salvation from sin seems to be less urgent than being loved, helped and comforted in difficulties and the problems of life.[114] It appears quite evident that this also influences the appropriation of infant baptism.

5.5.2.3. Reflection 3 — Forgiveness and Being Born in Sin

The discussion about the first baptismal question (on 'original sin') reflects the 'uneasiness' of pastors and parents with the doctrine of original sin and total depravity. The baptismal forms, in one way or another, profess the doctrine of election and original sin, the need for forgiveness of sin and rebirth. In baptismal services, pastors often use softening formulations to explain original sin, in order to avoid offence among non-Christian or non-Reformed family members and friends, who deny the doctrine of original sin.[115] Ordinary believers express their uneasiness about this teaching, without denying it.[116]

There are various reactions to the questions concerning original sin in the RCN. Some call it a sign of secularisation.[117] However, the Dutch theologian Ten Brinke reinterprets the doctrine of original sin as an answer to the (modern) question of 'involuntary sin': all humans are sinners, but as such, they are not only perpetrators but also victims, because they cannot do better. Humans cannot be kept responsible for Adam's sin, says Ten Brinke, but they are responsible for their own sins, even in cases when sin is an irresistible '*force majeur*'.[118] As a consequence, Ten Brinke states that a baby cannot be called sinful and guilty from birth on because it lacks the level of consciousness to do sin.

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[111] See above § 5.5.1.2.

[112] Rutger Bregman, *De meeste mensen deugen: een nieuwe geschiedenis van de mens* (Amsterdam: De Correspondent, 2019).

[113] '*De mens wordt als geliefd kind van God uitgenodigd om in een intieme relatie met God te leven*.': Klaver and Roeland, Johan H., 'Protestantisme', 40.

[114] See also the discussion of the Evangelical theologian Clark H. Pinnock in: C. van der Kooi, 'Creative Love Theism: The Doctrine of God in Reformed and Evangelical Theology', in *Evangelical Theology in Transition*, eds C. van der Kooi, E. van Staalduine-Sulman, and A. W. Zwiep, Amsterdam Studies in Theology and Religion 1 (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2012), 182–202.

[115] See also: Bert Loonstra, 'Komen onze kinderen schuldig ter wereld?', *CIP*, 27 March 2018, https://cip.nl/67292-komen-onze-kinderen-schuldig-ter-wereld?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2018Mar27&mtc=232048; Hilbert Meijer, 'Waarom de doopvragen dominees en ouders zwaar op de maag liggen', *Nederlands Dagblad*, 9 February 2019, https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/535165/waarom-de-doopvragen-dominees-en-ouders-zwaar-op-de-maag-liggen.

[116] E-160:19; father; 30+ / E-161:11; mother; 30+ / E-163:17; father; 30+ / E-173:17; father; 30+ / E-174:8; mother; 30+ / E-183:8-9; mother; 30+.

[117] Matthijs Haak, 'De discussie over doopvragen is een teken van secularisatie', 28 February 2019, https://jmhaak.com/2019/02/28/de-discussie-over-doopvragen-is-een-teken-van-secularisatie/?shared=email&msg=fail.

[118] H. ten Brinke, 'Erfzonde? Onvermijdelijkheid en verantwoordelijkheid' (PhD Thesis, VU University Amsterdam, 2018), 237, https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/erfzonde-onvermijdelijkheid-en-verantwoordelijkheid.

However, children will unavoidably become sinners, because they are born in a world where sin reigns.[119] This position is neither guided by free will nor by original sin, but by a human condition in which humans 'unavoidably' become sinners and it matches well with the understanding of many ordinary believers.[120] Several parents express that 'washing of sin' in infant baptism refers to future sin only:[121] *'I see it like this: when children are born they are born in a sinful world, even though they did not do any sin themselves, but they do live in that sinful world. So you cannot avoid that sins will stick to you, as when you ..uhm.. run with clean white clothes through a dirty forest. Then it's unavoidable that you become dirty.'* (E-181:19; mother; 30+)[122]

5.5.3. Belonging

In this section, I investigate the 'belonging' aspect of the appropriation of infant baptism: what does infant baptism mean to RCN respondents in terms of 'belonging' to God, the church and the Christian or non-Christian family members and the Dutch context.

5.5.3.1. Belonging to God's Covenant

'*I think the first thing is that God, through this [baptism], already speaks, says: you are Mine. To the child… No, I don't see it like we as parents really chose it, whether he [the child] belongs to the covenant or not, (…) but that it is especially God who makes His covenant and therefore we as parents can have him [the child] baptized.'* (E-168:5; father; 30+)[123]

We observe different opinions among the pastors on the relevance of the doctrine of the covenant today. One pastor explains that the main theological reason for infant baptism is the doctrine of the covenant, while in his preaching and teaching he does not often use the word 'covenant'.[124] Instead of the 'classical' RCN mutuality in the covenant ('grace and gratitude'), he strongly stresses God's grace, '*God's coming to us*', '*the giving God*'.[125] Another interviewed pastor stresses the aspect of 'belonging to God' in the covenant: '*What is a better start than that God's Name is proclaimed over your life if you are just some weeks old? I think my parents would have used terms like "covenant" etc., so to say. Well, those are not the words that first come to mind… I am very sure that my parents also said that you belong to God. But, well, I think they would just speak about this in somewhat different terms…*'[126] Another pastor calls infant baptism a 'performative rite': God's word and his deeds go together. Baptism is not only a sign but also a divine seal of the covenant which God makes

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[119] Ibid., esp. 302f; Gerard Wilts, 'Henk ten Brinke: "Erfzonde is geen noodlot"', *Nederlands Dagblad*, 18 December 2018, https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/538967/henk-ten-brinke-erfzonde-is-geen-noodlot-.

[120] ten Brinke, 'Erfzonde?', esp. 346f.

[121] E-161:9; mother; 30+ / E-163:17; father; 30+ / E-168:6; father; 30+ / E-169:14; mother; 30+ / E-181:19; mother; 30+ / E-184:2.6; father; 30+.

[122] *'Ik zie het zo dat kinderen als ze geboren worden, worden ze geboren in een zondige wereld, ook al hebben ze zelf nog geen zonde gedaan, maar ze leven wel in een zondige wereld. Dus dan kan het niet anders als dat je ook, dat zonden ook aan je kleven, net zoals dat je ehm, helemaal schoon met witte kleren door een besmeurd bos of zo rent. Ja, dan kan het niet zo zijn dat je niet ook vies wordt.'*

[123] '*Ik denk dat het eerste is, dat God daardoor ook al spreekt van: joh, jij bent van mij. Tegen het kind… Nee, ik zie het niet zozeer iets als dat we er als ouders echt voor, voor kiezen of hij wel of niet bij het verbond hoort, maar (…) dat dat vooral God is die zijn verbond aangaat en wij mogen als ouders hem daardoor laten dopen.*' (E-168:5; father; 30+).

[124] F-165:3; pastor; 60+ and passim.

[125] F-165:1; pastor; 60+.

[126] '*Wat is dan een betere start dan dat Gods naam over je leven wordt uitgesproken als je net één twee drie vier vijf weken oud bent… Ik denk dat mijn ouders nog wel wat termen hebben gebezigd als 'verbond' enzovoorts, zeg maar. Nou, dat zijn niet de eerste woorden die in mij opkomen. Dat je bij God hoort, dat zullen mijn ouders ook echt geheid gezegd hebben. Maar ehm, nou, ik denk dat ze gewoon in, in iets andere termen daarover zouden spreken…'*

with the parents and the child: it shows what God says in his promise and what He is doing in the life of the child.[127]

For most ordinary believers, infant baptism refers to belonging to God and His covenant and they mention three aspects. Firstly, respondents point to God's covenant with Abraham and the sign of circumcision, which illustrate the origin of the inclusion of children in the covenant and the legitimacy of the sacrament of infant baptism.[128] God has chosen the child already before it was born.[129] Therefore it should be baptized:[130] '*Why have the child baptized? Yes that he may belong to Christ as well and to that Kingdom, that eternal life, yes. And to the covenant, so to say. Yes that God is coming to him already now. Even though he is a small child, so to say, and that He already gets him involved, makes him part of the covenant.*'[131] Several parents use the analogy of an official wedding ceremony: even though a couple's loving relationship already exists before the wedding, a marital promise and the signature, performed in the right official setting are a clear sign and seal of the relationship between the marriage partners.[132]

Secondly, belonging to the Christian family is important: many parents mention that infant baptism points to the transmission of the faith from generation to generation, just as in the case of Abraham.[133] One traditional example is that the baptismal dress of the child is sometimes made from the (grand)mother's wedding dress and is passed on to the next generation.[134] The presence of family members in the baptismal service is seen as very important, also when those family members are not Christians or not in favour of infant baptism. In these cases, parents see infant baptism also as a form of witness to non-Christians.[135]

Thirdly, baptism signifies the belonging to God's people. Most parents are positive about the fellowship in the church and belonging to the congregation is important for shaping their lives as Christians, and they typically have friends there.[136] The public moment of baptism in the worship service is important, not so much because it is seen as an initiation into the church or the body of Christ, but because parents are proud and glad to present their child to the congregation. They also

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[127] F-189:15; pastor; 50+.

[128] F-172:15; teacher 30+ / F-176:10; elder; 40+ / E-177:5; mother; 30+ / E-179:6; father; 20+ / E-180:10; mother; 20+ / E-182:2; father; 30+ / E-184:13; father; 30+ .

[129] F-166:5.7; elder; 40+ / E-169:11; mother; 30+ / F-175:6; deacon; 30+ / F-176:6.18; elder; 40+ / E-177:5-8; mother; 30+ / E-180:3; mother; 20+ / E-182:2; father; 30+ / E-184:13; father; 30+.

[130] E-159:12; mother; 20+ / F-165:3; pastor; 60+ / F-166:5.11; elder; 40+ / E-168:12.13; father; 30+ / F-172:6; teacher 30+ / E-179:5.10; father; 20+ / E-180:3; mother; 20+ / E-181:7; mother; 30+ / E-184:9; father; 30+.

[131] '*Waarom laten dopen? Ja, dat hij ook bij Christus mag horen en bij dat Koninkrijk, bij dat eeuwige leven. Ja. En bij zijn verbond, zeg maar. Ja. Dat, ja, dat God nu al naar hem toekomt, ook al is hij als klein kind, zeg maar, dat Hij al, ja, hem daar al bij betrekt, deel maakt van het verbond…*' (E-168:2; father; 30+) Also here I notice a 'bricolage' of expressions used for child dedication and infant baptism.

[132] E-177:8; mother; 30+ / also: F-166:11; elder; 40+. See also: E-159:12; mother; 20+ / E-182:13; father; 30+. The image of the wedding promise and a wedding ring is also used in catechetical or popular explanations of infant baptism, e.g.: H. Westerink, *A Sign of Faithfulness. Covenant and Baptism* (Alberta, CA: Inheritance Publications Neerlandia, 1997), 11; Egbert Brink, *Het woord vooraf*, 5e dr (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2004), 161. Miranda Klaver mentions how the example of the wedding is used at adult baptism in an evangelical church, Klaver, 'Besprenkeling', 354.

[133] E-159:8; mother; 20+ / E-161:22; mother; 30+ / F-164:12; deacon; 40+ / F-166:17; elder; 40+ / E-182:7; father; 30+ – F-165:19; pastor; 60+ confirms this. As shown earlier: Abraham was the most frequent biblical reference in the interviews.

[134] E-181:8; mother; 30+.

[135] E-158:15; father; 20+ / E-160:16; father; 30+ / F-164:12; deacon; 40+ / E-173:20; father; 30+ / E-179:2; father; 20+. See also above, where I pointed out the problem of 'double listening'.

[136] See also: Jos Douma: https://www.levenindekerk.nl/2021/05/27/geloven-als-een-millennial-4-5-dingen-die-millennials-niet-en-3-dingen-die-ze-wel-willen-van-de-kerk/ (accessed 25-06-2021)

see this as a witness of their commitment to God and the Christian upbringing of the child.[137] Parents express their hopes and concerns about the spiritual growth of their children and expect the support of the church in the upbringing of their children.[138] Many parents indicate that the choice of a Christian or Reformed school for their children is part of their baptismal promise.[139]

5.5.3.2. Baptism as Inclusion

'If baptism would not have taken place, then at a certain moment you would get questions about why that didn't happen. And then I would have to explain, well, "because God didn't want to have you yet as a child", or something like that… I wouldn't even be able to answer…' (E-169:18; mother; 30+)[140]

Parents see their child first of all as God's child. Infant baptism functions as a sign and seal of God's ownership of the child: '*Acknowledging that, that, yes, Your sort of label is on the child.'*[141] God says in baptism: 'you belong'.[142] Parents all stress that salvation or belonging to God's covenant does not depend on participation in the rite.[143] When a child dies before it is baptized, there is no doubt about the salvation of the child of believing parents.[144]

In the Reformed confessions, the understanding is that the 'belonging' aspect of infant baptism also indicates a boundary or difference between children of 'believers and unbelievers',[145] but parents strongly hesitate to speak about this. They mention, for example, that infant baptism is richer than child dedication, but that is not to suggest that unbaptized children of evangelical Christians are not children of God.[146] Concerning the difference with children of non-Christians, a mother states: '*Concerning character, concerning sin, they are all no different, they are just as sinful as the people who are not Christians. But that they can know that they belong to the covenant of Jesus. (…) That they can learn that there is a God, and parents who explain that and that God has chosen them. (…) we received a specific promise from God and we may trust in that*.' (E-159:12; mother; 20+)[147]

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[137] E-158:8; father; 20+ / E-160:16; father; 30+ / E-170:13; father; 30+ / E-171:14; mother; 30+ / E-174:7; mother; 30+.

[138] E-159:4; mother; 20+ / E-161:16; mother; 30+ / E-162:15; mother; 30+ / E-167:18; mother; 30+ / E-170:9.12; father; 30+ / E-174:4; mother; 30+ / F-175:9; deacon; 30+ / F-176:11; elder; 40+ / E-177:12; mother; 30+ / E-179:4; father; 20+ / E-181:22 E-181:6; mother; 30+; mother; 30+ / E-183:11; mother; 30+.

[139] E-158:10; father; 20+ / F-164:17; deacon; 40+ / F-166:16; elder; 40+ / E-169:16; mother; 30+ / E-170:12; father; 30+ / F-175:10; deacon; 30+.

[140] *'Als de doop niet gebeurd zou zijn, dan krijg je op een gegeven moment natuurlijk vragen over waarom dat niet gebeurd zou zijn… En dan zou ik moeten uitleggen: "nou omdat God je als kind nog niet wilde" of zo… Ik zou niet eens antwoord kunnen geven…'*

[141] '*Erkennen dat, dat, ja, soort van Uw label er op staat…'* (E-167:13; mother; 30+). See also: E-159:12; mother; 20+ / F-166:5.7; elder; 40+ / E-168:5; father; 30+ / F-176:6.10.18; elder; 40+ / E-182:3; father; 30+.

[142] E-161:7; mother; 30+ / F-165:10; pastor; 60+ / E-168:5; father; 30+ / E-171:11; mother; 30+ / F-175:12; deacon; 30+ / E-180:5; mother; 20+ / E-181:18; mother; 30+.

[143] E-159:22; mother; 20+ / E-169:11; mother; 30+ / E-170:16; father; 30+ / E-171:7; mother; 30+ / E-173:15; father; 30+.

[144] E-158:11; father; 20+ / E-160:19; father; 30+ / E-163:14; father; 30+ / E-168:10; father; 30+ / E-173:15; father; 30+ / F-175:11; deacon; 30+ / E-183:10; mother; 30+ / E-184:10; father; 30+.

[145] BC art. 34; HC QA 74; WLC QA 165 / WSC QA 95 / WConf art. 28. NB this does not relate to the question of the salvation of unbaptized children.

[146] E-170:17; father; 30+ / F-172:15; teacher 30+ / E-180:9; mother; 20+ / E-181:6; mother; 30+.

[147] '*Qua karakter, qua zonde zijn ze allemaal niet anders, ze zijn net zo zondig als de mensen die niet christen zijn. Maar dat ze wel, bij het verbond van Jezus mogen horen. (…) Maar dat ze wel mogen weten dat er een God is, en ouders die uitleggen en dat God voor hem gekozen heeft. (…) ik vind ook niet dat ik het recht heb om te zeggen dat kinderen die gedoopt zijn beter zijn als kinderen die niet gedoopt zijn. Maar ik denk wel een bepaalde belofte die God naar je gedaan heeft, dat je daar wel mag op vertrouwen'*. F-166:14; elder; 40+ and F-175:11.12; deacon; 30+ reflect a comparable attitude.

Parents believe that baptized children are privileged, because they belong to God, and received his promise and their parents can tell them about God, while other children don't hear about God.[148] At the same time, parents stress that their children are no better than children that are not baptised.[149] If a child of non-Christians dies at a young age, interviewees reject any harsh opinions about the salvation of the children: 'only God knows'.[150]

5.5.4. Reflection — Belonging to the Covenant People of God

The teaching of the Covenant has been characteristic of the theological identity of the RCN in the past. In publications by RCN theologians, infant baptism is firstly a covenantal sign and seal from God for believers and their children. It is a sign of washing of sin through the blood of Christ and renewal through the Holy Spirit and a public initiation into the Body of Christ. The rite of baptism is not just an 'individual spiritual experience', but it is part of the Reformed liturgy, the meeting of God with His people.[151]

Secondly, in Reformed theology infant baptism is often characterized as a 'sign of ownership' because of the work of Christ.[152] The RCN theologian Trimp stated that in baptism the destructive kingship of sin and the devil in our lives is replaced by the ownership of Christ and the Triune God.[153]

Thirdly, the relationship between God and the covenant members is characterized in the formal theology of the RCN as 'promise and demand': God makes promises or 'self-obligations' and parents are called to confess their faith in the Triune God and promise to bring up their child in the faith that is taught in the church.[154]

Finally, the covenant is 'eternal' and those who reject the blessings of the covenant will face God's covenantal punishment.[155]

Of these four aspects of 'formal RCN theology,' only the promise of God's care is regularly mentioned by the respondents. Parents feel the importance and difficulty of Christian upbringing and need God's help and assurance: even if your children were to choose to live 'without God' when they grow up, He will not forget them. A mother summarizes her hope for her children: '*that they themselves may have a relationship in faith with God, and that they know that they are really loved by God*.'[156]

Instead of the strong accent on God's initiative in making the Covenant, the longing for a personal choice for Jesus is regularly expressed by ordinary believers and, for some, it is a reason to envy the

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[148] E-168:9; father; 30+ / F-175:11; deacon; 30+ / E-177:14; mother; 30+ / E-181:23; mother; 30+ / E-184:9; father; 30+. One mother understands infant baptism as 'reserving a place in heaven' and believes that if a child of believing parents dies unbaptized, we cannot be sure about its salvation (E-162:8.9; mother; 30+).

[149] E-168:9; father; 30+ / F-175:11; deacon; 30+ / E-177:14; mother; 30+ / E-181:23; mother; 30+ / E-184:9; father; 30+. One mother understands infant baptism as 'reserving a place in heaven' and believes, that if a child of believing parents dies unbaptized, we cannot be sure about its salvation (E-162:8.9; mother; 30+).

[150] F-164:13; deacon; 40+ / F-165:15; pastor; 60+ / E-170:17; father; 30+ / E-173:15; father; 30+.

[151] Trimp, 'The Sacrament of Baptism', 95; J. van Bruggen, *Het logo van het geloof: over de doop* (Kampen: Kok, 2004); Adrian Verbree, *Over dopen* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2009).

[152] See BC art. 34: 'By it [baptism] we are received into God's church and set apart from all other people and alien religions that *we may wholly belong to him whose mark and sign we bear*.' See also HeidCat 84.

[153] Trimp, 'The Sacrament of Baptism', 94.96; See also: C. Trimp, *De gemeente en haar liturgie* (Kampen: Uitgeverij van den Berg, 1989), 194f; Brink, *Het woord vooraf*, 155f.

[154] Trimp, 'The Sacrament of Baptism', 111.140f.

[155] The classical baptismal form says: '*omdat elk verbond twee delen heeft, namelijk een belofte en een eis, worden wij door God in de doop ook geroepen en verplicht tot een nieuwe gehoorzaamheid.*'['since every covenant contains two parts, a promise and a demand, we are, through baptism, called and obliged by God to a new obedience.']

[156] '*dat ze zelf een relatie, een geloofsrelatie met God ook echt mogen hebben, en dat ze zich echt geliefd weten door God*.' (E-171:21; mother; 30+)

rite of adult baptism.[157] Speaking about the church, ordinary believers desire a congregation that is a safe place, offers fellowship, friends, and a warm and caring community. This harmonizes with the search for community and a safe environment in the Dutch context. It also fits with contemporary Evangelicalism: the idea of the church as a warm and safe family is broadly adopted by members and pastors of the RCN.[158]

5.5.4.1. Reflection — Infant Baptism as a Boundary?

We have seen, that in speaking about the covenant and belonging, the longing for personal fellowship with God and other believers takes the centre stage, while aspects like the unity with the church as the body of Christ, the radical break with the power of sin and evil and the obligations or 'threats' of the Covenant seem to have only marginal meaning in the appropriation of infant baptism by ordinary RCN believers.

In the Reformed confessions and baptismal forms, Christian baptism signifies the initiation into the church as the body of Christ and is, in that sense, a boundary marker.[159] The 'Flood prayer' in the baptismal forms shows the inclusion of those baptised but also God's judgement over His enemies: *'In Your righteous judgment You punished the unbelieving and unrepentant world with the flood, but in Your great mercy You saved and protected the believer Noah and his family. You drowned the obstinate Pharaoh and all his host in the Red Sea, but led Your people Israel through the midst of the sea on dry ground — by which baptism was signified'*.[160] In the interviews, the stories of the Flood and Israel's exodus through the Red Sea were incidentally mentioned as a sign of God's love and care for his children in difficult situations or as referring to the washing of sin, but the aspect of judgment over God's enemies or God's anger over sin was not touched upon.[161]

This appropriation of infant baptism as 'belonging' is in line with the earlier described beliefs: for RCN respondents belonging means, first of all, safety with a loving God, being together with caring people in the church, who are ready to help in difficulties. The baptismal forms place infant baptism and Christian life in a Christ-centred and eschatological perspective — we are created to live for God until the consummation of all things. The parents' remarks reflect, first of all, an anthropocentric perspective: God is a caring and loving Father, who helps, comforts, guides and protects his children in the challenges of daily life. This overshadows the aspects of salvation and forgiveness of sin. Secondly, interviewees are reluctant to speak about salvation as a boundary: God is a loving Father and it is everybody's free choice to relate to God or not.[162] In the Dutch individualistic and secular context, religion has become a private matter: something between 'God and you', and the idea that the Christian faith is a choice with eternal consequences is difficult to profess in the Dutch secular

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[157] See also: Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, 'Over dopen in de Protestantse Kerk. Handreiking voor het gesprek met gemeenteleden die een "tweede doop" begeren of al hebben ondergaan', 2012, 20f, https://www.protestantsekerk.nl/download1331/Over-dopen-in-de-Protestantse-Kerk-handreiking-voor-gesprek-kerkenraden-2012.pdf.

[158] Boersema, 'Evangelical Movement', 172f; Paas, 'Ecclesiology in Context', 132f. For the importance of the 'community' and 'fellowship' for Dutch believers see Stefan Paas, *De werkers van het laatste uur: de inwijding van nieuwkomers in het christelijk geloof en in de christelijke gemeente* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2003), 180f.

[159] Marcel Barnard, 'Doop en belijdenis', in *De weg van de liturgie: tradities, achtergronden, praktijk*, eds N.A Schuman and Paul Oskamp, 4th ed. (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2008), 284. See BC art. 34 as well as HC QA 74: 'by baptism, the sign of the covenant, they [the children] too should be incorporated into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers.'

[160] The current baptismal forms 1 and 3 refer to Noah and the Red Sea. One pastor (F-165:12; pastor; 60+) and one mother (E-181:21; mother; 30+) refer to the Red Sea.

[161] F-165:12; pastor; 60+ / E-181:21; mother; 30+ / E-182:2; father; 30+.

[162] See for the 'anabaptist roots' of this attitude: W. van 't Spijker, *Gereformeerden en Dopers. Gesprek onderweg* (Kampen, the Netherlands: Kok, 1986).

context.[163] This results in infant baptism not being understood as a boundary, excluding 'unbelievers', but just as a sign of inclusion of the children of believers in God's love.[164]

5.5.5. Behaving

After discussing 'believing' and 'belonging' aspects of the appropriation of infant baptism, I now turn to the aspect of 'behaving'. I will discuss how the rite of infant baptism is prepared and performed and its impact on the parents' and children's way of living. Also, the question of infant and adult baptism will emerge.

5.5.5.1. The Practice of Infant Baptism

'That promise is not somewhere floating in the air, but there is just a moment where God says: 'look'. You can, say, be in a relationship and it can go very well and you can love each other very much, but when you marry, then you have a moment to which you can refer: "yes, but you promised me something then". In that way, it, yes, becomes tangible or concrete. And I think that is the same with baptism. You have a relationship with God and God says: "I take care of you" … but baptism is such a moment that you can say: yes, but God made me that promise.' (E-177:8; mother; 30+)[165]

Infant baptism is the default practice in the RCN: the children of believers belong to the covenant (church) and therefore they 'ought to be baptized'.[166] After the birth of a child, the pastor or elder visits the family at home and the topic of baptism is raised. Sometimes a separate meeting is planned with several parents to prepare for the baptismal service. Parents are often involved in the preparation of the baptismal service and may suggest elements for the liturgy (Scripture passage for the sermon; songs; testimony).[167]

In the service, the pastor explains the meaning of infant baptism with one of the baptismal forms. Then the parents come to the front (usually together with their other children). Children of the congregation are often asked to come close, too, and then the pastor also explains the meaning of baptism to them. The pastor reads the baptismal questions, to which the parents, who are confessing members, can respond and baptism is performed through sprinkling (usually three times) or immersion (once). Apart from the Trinitarian baptismal formula, pastors sometimes add words like 'God bless you', or 'receive God's blessing'. It also occurs that pastors place their hands shortly on the head of the child. Before and after the actual baptism there are songs, and parents also receive a signed baptismal certificate.

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[163] Wijnand Mijnhardt, 'A Tradition of Tolerance', in *Discovering the Dutch: On Culture and Society of the Netherlands*, eds Emmeline Besamusca and Jaap Verheul (Amsterdam, 2014), 109.

[164] F-164:3; deacon; 40+ / E-170:13; father; 30+ / F-175:9.12; deacon; 30+ / E-181:18; mother; 30+.

[165] '*Die belofte zweeft niet ergens in de lucht, maar er is gewoon een moment waarop God zegt: 'kijk'. Zeg maar je kan een relatie hebben en dat kan allemaal heel prima gaan en je kan super veel van mekaar houden, maar als je met mekaar trouwt, dan heb je een moment waarop je kan zeggen: "ja, maar toen heb je wat aan mij beloofd". Dan wordt het, ja, wordt het ook op die manier tastbaar of concreet. En ik denk dat dat met de doop ook zo is. Je hebt een relatie met God, en God zegt "ik zorg voor je". …de doop is wel een moment dat je kan zeggen ja, maar God heeft die belofte gedaan.'*

[166] See the RCN baptismal forms - D: 190:9; D: 191:3. In the current Church Order of the RCN, infant baptism is the theological starting point: 'Kerkorde GKv', 2014, ch. C39, http://www.kerkrecht.nl/node/1101. In the concept Church Order of the united RCN-DRC, adult baptism is the starting point: children of members who have done profession of faith receive baptism as well. Werkgroep Toekomstige Kerkorde, 'Kerkorde GKv-NGK 2020' (Regiegroep NGK-GKv, 2020), ch. C5.2, https://onderwegnaar1kerk.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/200908-Kerkorde-2020-tekst-def.pdf.

[167] E-160:7; father; 30+ / E-181:7; mother; 30+ / E-182:12.13; father; 30+ / F-189:9; pastor; 50+. Also: F-165:6; pastor; 60+.

The transformation process in which the RCN find themselves is also reflected in the practice of infant baptism:[168]
- the pastor is required to be authentic, by not just reading the official baptismal form but (also) using his own words and reacting to the needs of the parents and the congregation. Only the baptismal questions to the parents and the baptismal formula are to be used in fixed wordings,[169] but in the liturgical practice also locally adapted versions are used;[170]
- parents seek expression and authenticity by giving public testimony about the meaning of infant baptism for them and their child;
- the focus is on acknowledging and praising God as the caring and loving Father and Creator, who accepts believers and their children, just as Jesus did.[171] For about half of the parents this overshadows other aspects such as forgiveness, being engrafted in the body of Christ, and being renewed by the Holy Spirit — while other aspects from the baptismal forms, such as 'communion with Christ' or 'rebirth', do not resonate at all in the interviews;
- the (recent) practice of adding words of blessing to the official baptismal formula or placing a hand on the head of the child as a blessing is understood as insertion of Jesus' blessing of the children into the baptismal rite. Jesus' blessings have always been used to legitimize infant baptism, but in this way, it also satisfies the desire of (some) parents for child blessing and more embodiment and experience;
- instead of Genevan psalms (such as Psalm 105 / Psalm 139), today songs by *Sela* or *Opwekking* ('Revival')[172] are mostly used.
- baptism is sometimes moved to the afternoon service because it does not fit well in the morning service; according to several interviewees this makes infant baptism more of a family ceremony[173]
- till recently, the default mode of (infant) baptism was sprinkling. Today some RCN members ask for the immersion of their children. Some believe this better reflects the idea of being buried and resurrected with Christ (Romans 6), while others think it is more authentic (as in the Ancient Church) or Biblical;[174] while a pastor believes that it shows the idea of washing from sin more clearly.[175]
It is remarkable to observe that the parents of the majority of the RCN interviewees never talked with them about their baptism: it was a practice that went without saying. That situation has now

[168] Against the backdrop of the discussion on adult and infant baptism, Peter van der Laan, already in 1998, made some liturgical and spiritual suggestions for renewal in the practice of infant baptism: Van der Laan, *Eenmaal gedoopt*.
[169] 'Besluiten En Acta Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland: Goes 2020. Eredienst', accessed 9 April 2021, https://lv-gs2020.nl/RCN/acta/. (Besluiten Eredienst 28 november 2020). This ruling interprets article C.39.4 of the new church order, which stipulates that 'one of the accepted baptismal forms should be used at baptism'.
[170] For example: https://plantagekerkzwolle.nl/kerkdiensten/doop/.
[171] F-164:14; deacon; 40+ / F-165:7; pastor; 60+ / E-171:9; mother; 30+ / E-180:10; mother; 20+.
[172] For example the baptismal song '*Dooplied*' - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQ7uXdPZqy8 / *Ik zal er zijn* (I will be there): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4RgXZAEiQg / https://ikmisje.eo.nl/themas/muziek/sela-i-will-be-there%20.%20Or%20Kinderopwekking%20185. Or: Kinderopwekking 185 - De Heer zegent jou https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3E8ofw8bow. E-172:11; teacher; 30+.
[173] E-173:20; father; 30+ / E-179:2; father; 20+.
[174] F-176:9.13; elder; 40+ / F-178:11; pastor; 30+ / F-189:7; pastor; 50+. In several congregations in the RCN, immersion and sprinkling are possible modes for infant baptism. The discussion about the mode of baptism in conservative Reformed churches was briefly mentioned in 2005: https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/656124/onderdompelen-of-besprenkelen-dat-is-de-vraag. See also Koert van Bekkum, 'Ritueel', *Nederlands Dagblad*, 9 July 2011, https://www.nd.nl/opinie/commentaar/771822/ritueel.
[175] F-178:11; pastor; 30+.

changed because infant baptism has become much more of a conscious choice.[176] Most interviewed parents also plan to speak with the children about their reasons for infant baptism.[177]

5.5.5.2. A Touch of Dedication…

'*You can reach out to God, like look here, here is our child. And yes, with an appeal to what You promised, yes, that we indeed want to make that visible here, now, in this sign and seal.'*[178]

As indicated before: in the RCN, infant baptism has become more of a choice than in the past and the option of child dedication or child blessings was brought up regularly in the interviews, especially because it is practised by Evangelical relatives and friends. Parents often characterize the difference between infant baptism and child dedication: '*For me, baptism is that God says to your child: 'You belong' and dedication is that I ask of God to take care of our child, but it is not the hand of God that stretches down, but only … a hand lifted upward.'*[179] In infant baptism, God's promise is central, while in child dedication the promise of the parents is most essential.[180] However, for several respondents, infant baptism, too, is 'just a sign': the solemn promise of the parents is the central moment and for them, there is no divine agency in infant baptism.[181] In several RCN congregations, parents give a testimony about their choice to have their child baptized. Parents feel proud to take responsibility for their child in front of the church and sometimes understand a testimony as evangelism to non-Christian friends, colleagues or family members.[182]
Sometimes parents address their child directly at baptism and promise that they will take care of it,[183] while also mentioning God's promise of help.[184] Other parents do believe in God's active promise in baptism, but they also use expressions fitting to the practice of child dedication, for example, that in baptism parents give their child 'back to God', to 'show that God is the Father of the child' and to ask God's help for bringing up the child in a Christian way: '*we must do this together.'*[185] Some parents speak about God's 'accepting' of the child in baptism: '*You give the child back to God, like what Hannah did with Samuel. That is the kind of idea I have. You give it to God, you give the child back and then God accepts the child as, as His child.'* (E-183:16; mother; 30+)[186] A mother tells

[176] E-162:7; mother; 30+ / E-163:20; father; 30+ / E-168:14; father; 30+ / F-172:5; teacher 30+ / E-173:6; father; 30+ / F-175:4; deacon; 30+ / F-176:4; elder; 40+. See also: Leonard J. Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper: Recovering the Sacraments for Evangelical Worship* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 71. 'I cannot recall my parents talking about my baptism very much, or that any particular significance was placed on it.'

[177] One parent thought it was better not to tell the child, but let it find out itself. (E-162:15; mother; 30+)

[178] '*Je mag het zo aan, aan God aanreiken van, nou hier, dit is ons kind. En met, ja, met een beroep op hetgeen wat U beloofd hebt, nou ja, willen we dat dan hier inderdaad nu ook zichtbaar maken in de, in dat teken en zegel*.' (F-172:8; teacher 30+)

[179] '*Voor mij is de doop dat God tegen je kind zegt 'je hoort er bij', en opdragen is dat ik aan God vraag of Hij voor ons kind wil zorgen, maar dus niet die hand van God die naar beneden reikt - alleen maar de vraag om een hand omhoog.'* (E-180:10; mother; 20+). See also: E-167:13.15; mother; 30+ / E-168:13; father; 30+ / E-169:20; mother; 30+ / E-181:6; mother; 30+.

[180] F-164:10; deacon; 40+ / F-166:7; elder; 40+ / E-181:6; mother; 30+ / F-165:9; pastor; 60+.

[181] E-159:16; mother; 20+ /E-171:10; mother; 30+ / F-172:8; teacher 30+ / E-173:16; father; 30+ / E-179:14; father; 20+.

[182] E-170:18; father; 30+ / E-171:11; mother; 30+ / E-186:1; testimony parents / E-187:1-2; testimony parents.

[183] E-187; testimony parents. Inspiration for this 'promise' is e.g. taken from Max Lucado, *Ik beloof het je* (Amsterdam: Ark Media, 2014). See, e.g.: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6hyXFDO67Q (accessed 25-06-2021).

[184] E-160:17; father; 30+ / E-161:12; mother; 30+ / E-174:7; mother; 30+.

[185] E-161:10.15; mother; 30+. See also: E-159:1.5; mother; 20+ / E-162:7; mother; 30+ / E-173:7; father; 30+ / E-183:7.16; mother; 30+.

[186] '*Je geeft het kind terug aan God en, nou, wat Hanna zeg maar (deed?) met Samuel. Dat, dat, zo'n, zo'n beeld heb ik er een beetje bij. Je geeft God, je geeft het kind terug en God aanvaardt het kind dan als, als, als*

us that she wanted baptism for her child as soon as possible because she wanted to make the promise to God to bring up the child as a Christian — through baptism, the child officially belongs to God, and '*then God also made a promise back to us*.'[187]
This results in a certain hybridity of Reformed and Evangelical priorities: for a number of RCN parents, the reason for infant baptism is to make a promise to God about Christian upbringing, and to show thankfulness to God about the newborn baby — but for other parents baptism shows that God has privileged and chosen their child and that He takes the initiative to make a covenant, to adopt the child as His own and to take care of it.[188]

5.5.6. Reflection — Infant and Adult Baptism

In general, those interviewed are in favour of infant baptism, but most of them accept that others in the RCN or other churches prefer adult baptism, because also without baptism their children belong to the covenant.[189] Even though infant baptism is believed to be a sacrament through which God is acting and giving his promises, the children are also believed to be in the covenant from the mother's womb on. In two of the three RCN congregations where interviews were conducted, respondents said that there are no discussions on the topic of adult baptism. One reason might be that people who are in favour of adult baptism leave the church, especially because they typically also have other concerns (for example, desire for other styles of worship, other friends, desire for glossolalia).[190] In one of the congregations where interviews were conducted there is some discussion on adult baptism. From the side of the pastors or elders, there is less pressure on the parents to baptize children than in the past.[191] Some respondents express their concern about the changing attitude towards infant baptism and the growing preference for child dedication and adult baptism.[192]
In the context of this research, I would like to make just three short remarks.
In the first place, as the RCN theologian Schaeffer points out, the underlying ecclesiology of RCN believers is gradually changing from a 'church of the covenant' to a 'believer's church'.[193] In a Reformed covenantal church, children are organically incorporated into the Body of Christ: through infant baptism and Christian upbringing by the parents and the church. In an evangelical believer's church, the emphasis is on joining the church through a conscious decision to follow Jesus, as signified by adult baptism.[194] Many Evangelical Christians would agree with Klaver's statement: 'Becoming a Christian is (ideally) demarcated by reaching a point of decision in one's life and relies on individual responsibility. This decision-orientated model is publicly "demonstrated" in the Neo-Protestant baptismal practices.'[195] In the Reformed theology of infant baptism, God's choice and promise are the central moments, while the 'answer of faith' hopefully comes later. However, adult baptism is an act of 'embodied faith', an 'expression of the inner converted state of the believer'.[196]

Zijn kind.' (E-183:16; mother; 30+). This respondent explicitly indicates that this expression is also used in evangelical churches.

[187] E-159:20; mother; 20+.

[188] E-160:16; father; 30+ / E-167:12; mother; 30+.

[189] E-170:12; father; 30+ / F-172:15; teacher 30+ / E-180:10; mother; 20+. Research in RCN church plantings point in the same direction: Paas and Schaeffer, 'Reconstructing Reformed Identity'.

[190] F-166:9; elder; 40+.

[191] E-163:12; father; 30+ / F-164:3.18; deacon; 40+ / F-166:10; elder; 40+ / F-172:15; teacher 30+ / F-176:20; elder; 40+.

[192] E-159:3; mother; 20+ / E-160:21; father; 30+ / F-166:6; elder; 40+ / F-175:17; deacon; 30+.

[193] Schaeffer, 'Doop en keuzekerk'; Cf. Parush R. Parushev, 'Doing Theology in a Baptist Way', in *Zo zijn onze manieren! In gesprek over gemeentetheologie*, ed. Teun van der Leer, Baptistica Reeks 1 (Barneveld, Nederland: Unie van Baptisten Gemeenten in Nederland, 2009), 72.

[194] See also: Klaver, 'From Sprinkling to Immersion'. See also: Verbree, *Over dopen*, 112f.

[195] Klaver, 'From Sprinkling to Immersion', 475.

[196] Ibid., 481.485.

Secondly, in our research, we noticed that, apart from a shift in ecclesiology, the desire for experience and the opportunity to give a personal testimony is a driving force in the changing perception of infant baptism. In the Dutch secularized context, in which religious authority is situated in individual responsibility and choice, and in which believers long for personal religious experience, adult baptism seems a more attractive rite than infant baptism. This desire for experience and the possibility to witness is also reflected in the fact that some RCN believers are re-baptized in an Evangelical church but want to remain members of the RCN. Because baptism is 'once and for all' in the Reformed tradition, baptized children cannot express their choice through adult baptism at a later moment and, for that reason, they do so in an evangelical context.[197]
Thirdly, apart from ecclesiology and spirituality, we can also point to a change in soteriology. The RCN theologian De Ruijter mentions that the way you believe shapes your liturgy (just as the liturgy can also have a formative influence on beliefs).[198] The PCN theologian De Roest states, comparably: '*tell me what your church practice looks like and I will tell you who your God is*'.[199] We observed earlier that for many parents their promise to God and their agency in infant baptism are very important. Besides this, ordinary believers hesitate with regard to the teaching of original sin and there is waning attention to the need for a real change of ownership, being engrafted into the Body of Christ and receiving forgiveness of sin. This implies that essential theological notions from the theology of infant baptism, as expressed in the Reformed confessions, baptismal forms and theological writings of RCN theologians, hardly resonate among ordinary believers. However, the aspects of inclusion in God's love and the trust in God's presence and care remain strong incentives for infant baptism as a meaningful sign and seal of inclusion in God's love for Dutch Reformed parents.

5.5.7. Experiencing

'I expected that it would not really stir up my feelings. But it was really special… About God's reaching out to, to a child. Gladness, the joy that he was born in our family and also that we could entrust him, so to speak, to God because we believe and know that God goes with him.' (E-167:12; mother; 30+)[200]

In this aspect of appropriation, I enquire into the experience of God's active presence in and through infant baptism, as well as about the feelings or emotions of the parents.

5.5.7.1. A Touch of the Sacred?[201]

'*I see this with many young people, that conscious choice [for infant baptism]. People who say: "yes, we really want to have our child baptized" and they are touched by it, yes, I really see that happening*.'[202]

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[197] Ibid., 475.
[198] Kees de Ruijter, *De hemel op aarde: Liturgie voor kerkgangers* (Utrecht: Kok Boekencentrum, 2021), 37.
[199] Henk de Roest, 'Heil, God en kerk in de evangelicale beweging binnen de gevestigde kerken: "Empirische dogmatiek" als een vorm van praktische theologie', in *God in een kantelende wereld: geloof en kerk in veranderende contexten*, eds F. Gerrit Immink and Cas J.A. Vos (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2009), 232.
[200] '*Ik had verwacht dat het niet per se heel veel bij me los zou maken of zo. Maar dat was toch wel echt bijzonder… Van, van Gods uitreiken naar een, naar een kind. Blij, blijdschap dat, dat hij geboren mocht worden in ons gezin. En dat we hem, ja, dat we hem ook aan God in die zin mogen toevertrouwen omdat we dat geloven en weten dat God met hem meegaat.*' (E-167:12; mother; 30+)
[201] I borrow this title from the book of F. Gerrit Immink, *The Touch of the Sacred: The Practice, Theology, and Tradition of Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).
[202] '*Dat zie ik bij veel jonge mensen terug, die bewuste keuze (voor de kinderdoop). Mensen die echt zeggen van "ja, we willen écht ons kindje laten dopen en die worden erdoor geraakt", en ja, dat zie ik echt gebeuren.'* (E-167:20; mother; 30+)

Infant baptism is a joyful event: parents are thankful for the gift of new life and parenthood, but also because their child belongs to God and receives forgiveness (or future forgiveness}.[203] For some ordinary believers, the actual baptism with water is the most important moment.[204] For some others, it is the solemn pronunciation of the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that touches them most.[205] The majority of the parents mention the songs as the most impressive moment.[206]
A number of the interviewed RCN ordinary believers are convinced that God is actively present at the baptism. Several parents mentioned that they experienced God's presence during the baptismal service of their child, especially while singing 'songs of blessing'.[207] Others mention that, through the words and actual baptism of the pastor, God Himself gives his promise and seals the covenant with the parents and their child ('performative act'). One mother describes: '*You promise something to God yourself, but you also feel that God, so to say, stretches his hand toward you, like, "Hey I, I care for you, I care for your child, I gave you this child, take good care of it." That, that is what you feel at that moment (…) God indeed says to you, your son, your daughter, like, yes, you belong to Me, (…) I support you, I take care of you, I am always there for you.'* (E-161:7; mother; 30+)[208] God gives his promises and the parents respond by 'taking God's hand' and promising to bring up the child in the Christian faith.[209]
In addition to this, several ordinary believers express their desire to experience more in and around (infant) baptism, which is often triggered by experiences in Evangelical-Pentecostal churches.[210] They believe infant baptism to be Biblical, but see the expression of a personal choice as the strong side of adult baptism.[211] One mother who had been re-baptized in an evangelical church before she joined the RCN indicates: '*It was really a moment of a very deliberate choice and a real kind of… something like perishing (…) So it was, it really felt almost like a physical new start… with God.'*[212] Now, her children had been baptized in the RCN, but she hopes that the future 'profession of faith' can bring her child the same kind of experience that she had in adult baptism.[213]
This desire for more experience is expressed differently. Firstly, some parents may ask for infant baptism by immersion instead of sprinkling, and several RCN congregations practise this today. For most of the respondents, this is not an important issue, even though one elder believes that

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[203] F-172:10; teacher 30+ / E-173:9.16; father; 30+ / F-175:16; deacon; 30+ / E-184:7; father; 30+.
[204] E-160:22; father; 30+ / F-165:18; pastor; 60+ / E-174:6; mother; 30+ / E-180:7; mother; 20+.
[205] E-161:10; mother; 30+ / E-162:7.14; mother; 30+ / E-169:11.20; mother; 30+ / E-171:17; mother; 30+ / E-173:1; father; 30+ / F-178:8-9; pastor; 30+.
[206] E-158:15;father; 20+ / E-162:11; mother; 30+ / F-165:17; pastor; 60+ / F-175:15; deacon; 30+ / E-177:15; mother; 30+ / E-179:11; father; 20+ / E-181:9; mother; 30+ / E-183:5; mother; 30+. See Gerrit-Jan KleinJan, 'Muziek is voor bekeerling belangrijker dan preek', *Trouw*, 22 June 2011, https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/muziek-is-voor-bekeerling-belangrijker-dan-preek~b5c9bcca/; Klaver, 'Besprenkeling', 350.
[207] E-161:6-7; mother; 30+ / E-162:11; mother; 30+ / E-163:10; father; 30+ / E-171:15; mother; 30+ / E-184:3; father; 30+; (also F-165:17; pastor; 60+).
[208] '*Je belooft zelf iets richting God, maar daarin voel je ook dat God zeg maar Zijn hand naar jou uitsteekt van he, ik zorg voor jou, ik zorg voor je kind, ik heb jou dit kind gegeven, zorg er goed voor, dat, dat voel je op dat moment wel. (…) God zegt inderdaad tegen je, je zoon, je dochter van ja, je hoort bij Mij, (…) Ik zorg voor je, Ik ben er altijd voor je.'* (E-161:7; mother; 30+)
[209] E-158:5.6; father; 20+ / E-159:13; mother; 20+ / E-161:7.10; mother; 30+ / E-167:12.14.20; mother; 30+ / E-169:12; mother; 30+ / E-171:6.11; mother; 30+ / E-179:10; father; 20+ / E-180:5; mother; 20+ / E-181:15; mother; 30+ / F-189:15; pastor; 50+.
[210] Barnard and others mention 'a desire for an expanding of bodily performance and an enlargement of material objects': M. Barnard, J. Cilliers, and C. Wepener, *Worship in the Network Culture: Liturgical Ritual Studies. Fields and Methods, Concepts and Metaphors* (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 214.
[211] E-167:16; mother; 30+ / E-168:13; father; 30+ / F-178:11; pastor; 30+.
[212] '*Het was echt een moment van een heel bewuste keuze en het werkelijk soort van ondergaan of zo (…) Dus dat was, het was echt bijna voelde het fysiek als een nieuw begin… met God.'* (E-167:9; mother; 30+)
[213] E-167:11; mother; 30+.

immersion reflects the aspect of washing of sin better as a sign of 'dying to the old life and resurrection in a new life' (Rom. 6).[214] Others do not believe that immersion would affect the experience of baptism.[215]
Secondly, sometimes RCN believers are rebaptized in an Evangelical church, without wanting to leave the RCN or denouncing the meaning of infant baptism. They desire to give witness to their choice for Jesus and, therefore, they ask to be rebaptised. The bodily experience of immersion and the personal witness express their personal choice and underline their commitment to God.[216] An elder remembers a young woman who was rebaptised in an Evangelical church (even though having been baptized as a child) declaring: '*Now I really want to answer to my first baptism as a child… I feel reborn, so I also want to stand up in a new life, and, therefore, also be baptised by immersion.*' (F-176:13; elder; 40+)[217] The woman uses the expression here that is typically used in the RCN for the public profession of faith ('answer to my baptism'). She avoids the word 'rebaptism', in order not to offend her parents or to suggest that her infant baptism was not good enough – and she wants to remain a member of the church.[218] In this way, the meaning of rebaptism is 'reframed' as a 'confirmation of infant baptism' or a 'profession of faith' ('*geloofsbelijdenis*'). This makes sense to late modern Reformed believers who seek more experience and expression of their commitment to Christ.[219]

5.5.8. Reflection — Desiring Experience

The members of the RCN participate in the Dutch context, with its desire for authenticity, spirituality and experience. Roeland points out that 'experience is increasingly and collectively evoked and commodified' and Christians are influenced by this 'experience project' of late modern life.[220]
This means firstly, that the choice and commitment of the parents in infant baptism receives much attention, which is especially visible in the parental baptismal testimony.[221]
Secondly, there is also more attention for the experience of God's presence at baptism. A father witnesses: '*Well, if you baptize your child as parents, you grasp the hand God is holding out to you, you do this for your child, to make sure that she now also belongs to God, so to speak. She is not aware of this… But by giving that hand to God, we agreed with Him, we promised that we will bring her up according to his rules. Just as He wishes. In any case, we try to do that as well as possible*.'[222]
Thirdly, according to the formal RCN theology, a sacrament is a sign and seal (or 'guarantee'[223]) of God's promises (forgiveness, being baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, renewing

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[214] F-176:9.13.21; elder; 40+.
[215] F-166:11; elder; 40+.
[216] F-165:20; pastor; 60+. See Klaver, 'From Sprinkling to Immersion', 485.
[217] '*Nu wil ik graag antwoord op geven op mijn eerste doop als kind… ik voel me herboren, dus ik wil ook opstaan in een nieuw leven en dus door onderdompeling gedoopt worden.'* (F-176:13; elder; 40+)
[218] F-176:13; elder; 40+ – the same E-164:12; mother; 30+. See for a theological reflection and practical advice on the question of rebaptism in the Protestant Church: Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, 'Over dopen in de Protestantse Kerk. Handreiking voor het gesprek met gemeenteleden die een "tweede doop" begeren of al hebben ondergaan'; C. Graafland, *Volwassendoop, Kinderdoop, Herdoop. Een Bijbelse Verkenning* (Amersfoort, NL: IZB, 1979).
[219] Roeland, *Selfation*, 57f.
[220] Ibid., 54.
[221] E-160:16; father; 30+; E-171:14; mother; 30+.
[222] '*Nou, als je het wel doopt, dan heb je als ouders zijnde zeg maar de hand die God heeft uitgestoken heb jij als ouders zijnde voor je kindje gepakt... uhm, om er voor te zorgen dat, dat, dat zij nu ook bij God hoort, zeg maar. Dus zij is er niks van bewust… Maar door God die hand te geven hebben wij, nou ja, afgesproken met Hem, hebben wij beloofd dat, dat wij haar op zullen voeden volgens Zijn regels. Zoals Hij dat graag wil. Wij doen in ieder geval ons best om dat zo goed mogelijk te doen.'* (E-158:6;father; 20+)
[223] See the RCN Baptismal Forms 1 and 3: *Gereformeerd Kerkboek*, 668.677.678.

work of the Holy Spirit), given to meet our weakness as believers.[224] This understanding of the 'promise of baptism' is not denied by ordinary believers, but it seems not very relevant to them either — instead, they accentuate the promise of God's loving and caring presence in the lives of our children ('therapeutic turn'). Also, the evangelical shift from a didactic to an experiential form of believing as described by Klaver and others is reflected in the fresh appropriation of infant baptism in the RCN.[225] The experience of God's agency as an immediate divine presence at infant baptism is a meaningful fresh appropriation of infant baptism for a number of Dutch Reformed parents and makes it a powerful encouragement from God. In the secular Dutch context, which appears to be void of divine presence, it assures them of God's love and care for their child.[226]

5.5.9. Mutual Relationship between Believing, Belonging, Behaving and Experiencing

After having discussed the four aspects of appropriation, I would now like to conclude by addressing the mutual relationships between these aspects, which together shape the 'baptismal narrative' of the interviewed RCN believers.

5.5.9.1. Believing and Behaving

The theology of the baptismal forms is rich and the language is very elaborate, but the visible act of infant baptism in the RCN was traditionally very sober. The reading of a long and complicated baptismal form gave the impression that infant baptism served mainly as an illustration of the 'rational' preaching and teaching in the church.[227] Today this has changed. For the pastors and a number of congregation members the proclamation of the promise of the Triune God makes infant baptism a 'means of grace', a 'visible seal', a divine 'performative' presence and speaking — and not just an illustration of the doctrine of forgiveness. The comparison with a wedding promise or a kiss points to the 'performative' character of baptism: the baptismal water becomes a creational medium for the divine agency of making a personal and trustworthy promise of faithfulness to the child.[228] However, for a number of other parents, infant baptism comes close to child dedication: it is about their parental promise, their personal testimony in the service and taking responsibility for the upbringing of the child, while for them references to God's acting in baptism are secondary or absent.[229]

5.5.9.2. Believing and Experiencing

In the Reformed confessions and the baptismal forms, the divine presence in the sacraments is attributed to the Holy Spirit, who applies the fruit of Christ's work to the believer and unites the believer with Christ. The RCN baptismal forms state: 'The Holy Spirit guarantees that He comes to live in you. He unites you with Christ. In this way, you will one day be perfectly clean.'[230] However, there is very little mention of the Holy Spirit in the interviews. Also, RCN parents who prefer adult

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[224] Brink, *Het woord vooraf*, 155; Pleizier, Huijgen, and te Velde, *Gewone Catechismus*, 33. See also BC art. 33: 'God, mindful of our insensitivity and infirmity. Has ordained sacraments to seal His promises and to be pledges of His good will and grace towards us.' Canadian Reformed Churches, *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (Premier Printing Ltd, 1987), 465.

[225] Klaver, 'From Sprinkling to Immersion', 475.

[226] See what is discussed above in § 5.1.

[227] See for a parallel with regard to the Lord's Supper: Bosman, *Celebrating the Lord's Supper in the Netherlands. A Study of Liturgical Ritual Practices in Dutch Reformed Churches*, 243; 266f; 291f. See also Wim van der Schee, 'Seculier gereformeerd', in *Open voor God. Charles Taylor en christen-zijn in een seculiere tijd*, eds Hans Burger and Geert Jan Spijker (Barneveld, Nederland: Vuurbaak, 2014), 51.

[228] E-177:11; mother; 30+ / E-181:15; mother; 30+ / E-182:13; father; 30+.

[229] See for a comparable result, with respect to the Lord's Supper: Bosman, *Celebrating the Lord's Supper in the Netherlands. A Study of Liturgical Ritual Practices in Dutch Reformed Churches*, 249f.

[230] '*De heilige Geest garandeert je dat hij in je komt wonen. Hij maakt je één met Christus. Daardoor zul je eens volmaakt zuiver zijn*.' *Gereformeerd Kerkboek*, 668.

baptism don't mention that they want 'more of the Spirit' or long for an experience of rebirth, but they point to the importance of a bodily experience as confirmation of their conscious choice for Jesus.
For many parents, infant baptism means, in the first place 'being accepted and loved by God' and 'being a precious creature of God'. This same spirituality, which accentuates the development of God-given talents and gifts with the purpose of 'human flourishing', is also visible in the Evangelical movement.[231]
Secondly, we observe that pastors and some of the parents[232] mention the 'classical' notions of baptism (washing from sin and renewal by the Holy Spirit), but many ordinary believers stress the 'therapeutic character' of infant baptism, while the other aspects of infant baptism that are mentioned in the baptismal forms are not denied but receive very little attention.[233] The focus is on the unconditional acceptance of wonderful children by a loving Father, who keeps the children safe in a threatening and sinful world, which is deeply secular and experienced as devoid of God's presence.[234] This shift in emphasis shows a 'fresh appropriation' of infant baptism by ordinary believers in the late modern Dutch context. But it also raises the question of what this means for the function and meaning of infant baptism: is there still a need for 'pearls in God's hand' to be washed by the blood of Christ in baptism?[235]

5.5.9.3. Behaving and Experiencing

In the Reformed confessions, the function of the sacraments is described as a means of grace, which strengthens our weak human faith through visible signs.[236] God's promise of salvation and care is given to believers, with the purpose that they might experience God's goodness with all their senses.[237] In this way, attention to the senses and religious experience is part of the Reformed tradition. The characterization of a sacrament as God 'stretching out His hand' and a 'kiss from God' show the intimacy of God's active presence in infant baptism.[238] In the interviews, a lack of meaning concerning the baptismal water was observed. For some interviewees, the water sign has no symbolic meaning at all and could even be missed. For others, the water does not refer to a (future) washing of sin but is more a general sign of the Covenant. Very few interviewees mention the idea of being buried and raised with Christ, and nobody mentioned 'being washed with the blood of Christ' – even though these are central notions in the confessions (especially the Heidelberg Catechism) and the RCN baptismal forms.
The current conversation about infant baptism by immersion can be understood as a 'turn from disengaged reason to embodied experience'.[239] Reformed theologians typically stated that the mode of baptism is not important.[240] In the past, several RCN professors and pastors expressed that immersion would better reflect the meaning of baptism, but this never resulted in a reconsideration

[231] Klaver and Roeland, Johan H., 'Protestantisme', 39v; See also: Miranda Klaver and Peter Versteeg, 'Evangelicalisering als proces van religieuze verandering', *Praktische theologie* 34, no. 2 (2007): 169–82; Roeland, *Selfation*.
[232] See also Van der Laan, *Eenmaal gedoopt*, 166f.
[233] See for a comparable development, with respect to the Lord's Supper: Marinus de Jong, 'Heaven Down Here: The Presence of the Spirit in Reformed and Charismatic Worship', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 9, no. 4 (1 January 2015): 375–95. However, De Jong's trust in the formative power of liturgy (following J.A.K. Smith) requires empirical grounding.
[234] For example: E-167:13; mother; 30+ / E-168:9; father; 30+ / E-170:17.18; father; 30+.
[235] See also De Bruijne, 'Zicht op de doop'.
[236] BC art. 35: Canadian Reformed Churches, *Book of Praise*, 466.
[237] C. van der Kooi, *Tegenwoordigheid van Geest: Verkenningen op het gebied van de leer van de Heilige Geest* (Kampen: Kok, 2006), 104.
[238] E-181:15; mother; 30+.
[239] Roeland, *Selfation*, 55; see also: Van der Kooi, *Tegenwoordigheid van Geest*, 92f.
[240] Trimp, *De gemeente en haar liturgie*, 190.

of the existing practice.[241] Today, the interaction with evangelical Christians, as well as with the Dutch secular context, raises this question anew. Some RCN congregations practise both sprinkling and immersion, while some other churches reject immersion in order to avoid any form of 'elitism' among congregation members. The renewed attention to the mode of baptism reflects a fresh appropriation of infant baptism. In the secular Western context, where transcendence is typically denied and a 'buffered self' is predominant, Reformed Christians desire personal experience of God's presence, and the appropriation of infant baptism reflects this. For a number of parents, infant baptism primarily seals and signifies a therapeutic and warm relationship with a caring Father, who is always there for his children. The symbol of sprinkling is not experienced as very impressive, but infant baptism by immersion seems to embody the desired presence of God and to signify a personal relationship with God as the heavenly Father.

5.5.9.4. Belonging and Believing

Up until the 1990s, infant baptism has been an identity marker of conservative Reformed churches such as the RCN. Of the children of RCN members, 99% were baptised and not baptizing your child would be a reason for pastoral admonishment.[242] To be rebaptised was then seen as actually leaving the RCN.[243] The more recent RCN Synods, too, see infant baptism as the only recognized practice and declare that rebaptism is not biblical.[244]

The interviews show, firstly, that most respondents, while considering infant baptism important for themselves, also have sympathy for the practice of adult baptism. In the terms of Hiebert, we could say that the RCN congregational structure of a bounded set has changed into a centred set: instead of defining who does or does not belong to the church through adhering to Reformed teachings such as infant baptism, the focus is on how one relates to the centre, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, while Reformed teachings and practices such as infant baptism become adiaphora[245] and lose their character as an identity marker, becoming optional.[246]

Secondly, most parents believe that the Covenant starts with God, but the 'therapeutic turn' stimulates the idea that God is first of all there to care for his children, rather than that believers should live for God's glory and serve Him as their King. This results in confessional Reformed concepts related to infant baptism, such as covenant and election, being neglected or appropriated in new ways. For example, interviewees speak about God's election but do so in the context of God as a good and caring Creator, rather than in the framework of sin and salvation. Other aspects of the Reformed theology of infant baptism, such as the need for forgiveness, conversion, dying and being resurrected with Christ, or rebirth through the Holy Spirit no longer seem to be resonating.[247]

5.5.9.5. Belonging and Behaving

The RCN baptismal forms call strongly upon both parents and children to live as faithful members of the covenant. In the third baptismal form of the RCN, there is an explicit baptismal commemoration

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[241] Ibid., 191; F.F. Venema, *Wat is een christen nodig te geloven?* (Groningen: Vuurbaak, 1978), 242; Van der Laan, *Eenmaal gedoopt*, 168f; See already H. Bouwman, *Gereformeerd kerkrecht: het recht der kerken in de practijk*, vol. 2 (Kampen: Kok, 1934), 316.

[242] In 1914, the Synod of The Hague decided (article 138) that believers who reject infant baptism can be members of the church if they refrain from propagating their opinions, but they cannot be chosen as office bearers. http://www.kerkrecht.nl/sites/default/files/ActaGKN1914_2.pdf.

[243] In 2006/2007, a discussion in the Nederlands Dagblad illustrates the pastoral change in this respect: https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/653037/doopdissidenten-in-de-kerk.

[244] See also article C.39 of the latest church order - https://www.gkv.nl/bestuur-en-organisatie/kerkorde/

[245] See for the idea of the churches as 'centred sets' and 'bounded sets': Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 112f. See also: Paas, 'Ecclesiology in Context', 144f.

[246] This is also suggested in: Paas and Schaeffer, 'Reconstructing Reformed Identity'.

[247] F-164:5.7.10; deacon; 40+ / F-166:7; elder; 40+.

for the congregation, an exhortation to be faithful to God, to fight sin and not to be ashamed to witness about Christ.[248]

Most interviewed parents are dedicated to a Christian upbringing of their child, but find this difficult in a secularized Dutch society. Parents see a clear relationship between their promise at infant baptism and a Christian upbringing. At baptism, the child is placed on the path with God. Parents promise to introduce the children to a life with God, to church life and catechetical and liturgical practices, to show God's love and adopt a Christian identity.[249] The choice of a good Christian school is very important in this. Parents stress that Christians who don't baptise their children can also bring up their children faithfully, but in baptism, parents receive the spiritual encouragement that they do this 'together with God'.[250]

In short, in infant baptism, RCN parents receive an incentive and encouragement to bring up their children in the Christian faith, with God's help and in the context of the congregation. In this sense, the rite of infant baptism could have a formative effect on the parents and the congregation: the initiation into a life with God as a loving Father, in a hostile world, begins with the baptismal water.

5.5.9.6. Belonging and Experiencing

The interviewees all belong to the RCN and stressed the importance of feeling at home in the church. Most of them experience fellowship, especially in the cell groups (*mini-wijk*) and have friends in the church.

At the same time: thousands of people leave the RCN every year.[251] Some lost their faith, others chose to believe without belonging to a congregation. A considerable group (especially younger people) join Evangelical congregations and are rebaptised as part of this transition. Some see the spiritual deficit of the RCN as the deeper cause of people leaving the church: there was and is not enough focus on the core of what it means to believe and be part of the church: faith in Jesus and the Triune God.[252] The RCN theologian Van Bekkum signals that the core of spiritual life in the RCN is often more a 'living before God' than 'communion with God'.[253]

The 'cross-border traffic' between denominations also illustrates Taylor's observation that late modern believers choose a church without considering larger denominational or confessional frameworks.[254] '*The religious life or practice that I become part of, must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this.'*[255]

Concerning infant baptism, this leads some to look for rebaptism in an Evangelical church, while remaining a member of the RCN. Others develop — maybe unconsciously — fresh appropriations of infant baptism, which reflect a desire for experiencing God's presence, sacramental embodiment and the importance of a personal witness of the parents, reflecting a growing desire to a more experiential way of being Christian and an openness to the spirituality of the Evangelical-Charismatic movement. This is also paired with a critical attitude towards a more rational and dogmatic way of believing, which was for many years characteristic of the RCN, but seems no longer to resonate with ordinary believers in our late modern context.

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[248] *Gereformeerd Kerkboek*, 678.

[249] E-158:6; father; 20+ / E-159:9; mother; 20+ / E-161:8.15; mother; 30+ / E-162:14; mother; 30+ / E-163:15; father; 30+ / F-165:16; pastor; 60+ / E-169:13; mother; 30+.

[250] E-159:1.5; mother; 20+ / E-161:10.15; mother; 30+ / E-162:7; mother; 30+ / E-173:7; father; 30+ / E-183:7.16; mother; 30+.

[251] The RCN lost 2153 members in 2018, 2014 members in 2019 and 2262 in 2020. https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/1034094/ja-er-verlaten-veel-mensen-de-gkv-maar-er-is-een-relativering-m (accessed 27-07-2022).

[252] See, for example: Hans Schaeffer: https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/1033289/vrijgemaakten-verliezen-in-2020-recordaantal-leden. (accessed 16-06-2021)

[253] van Bekkum, 'Verlangen', 144f, esp. p. 156.

[254] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 514.

[255] Ibid., 486–87.

5.6. Baptismal Narrative — a Dutch Appropriation

Finally, I now summarize the analysis in a Dutch Reformed baptismal narrative as it emerges from the interviews with, in particular, the ordinary believers:

In the rite of infant baptism, God promises to make a Covenant with the child and to show his Fatherly care and presence. Parents witness of their trust in God, who never leaves their children in daily life and forgives (future) sin. (believing)
Infant baptism signifies a loving and inclusive relationship with God but is not experienced as a boundary. (belonging)
Parents promise to raise their children in a Christian way and desire the safe environment of the church and a Christian school for their family. The public rite of infant baptism and the possibility of giving a public witness in the service is important for a number of parents. (behaving)
Infant baptism makes many parents glad and proud and strengthens their trust in God's presence and care in the lives of their children. (experience).

The narrative can be visualized in this way:

Figure 5 Baptismal Narrative RCN The Netherlands

5.7. Summarizing Reflections

The RCN traces its roots back to the Secession (1834) when it became independent from the National Reformed church. After other church splits in 1944 and 1967, the RCN gradually evolved

into today's denomination. Today, the RCN finds itself in a context of secularization, which is characterized by de-churching, in which religion is pushed back into the private sphere as an expression of individual spirituality.
Infant baptism is the common baptismal practice in the RCN, but the influence from the secular context, as well as from the Evangelical-Pentecostal movement, also questions the validity of infant baptism. Pastors and theologians typically adhere to the normative and formal voices of Reformed theology, as expressed in the Reformed confessions and the baptismal forms. Ordinary believers often have difficulties with aspects of the teaching of infant baptism as expressed in the Reformed confessions and baptismal forms, especially the doctrine of original sin. Various aspects of the baptismal forms or confessions are not denied but seem no longer to be relevant, such as the union with Christ or the work of the Holy Spirit. Rather, for parents, infant baptism speaks first of all about God as a good Creator who gives new life, as a loving Father of their precious children, who cares and is always present.
In the Dutch context, the boundaries between denominations have become more fluid and formal church membership has become less important than in the past. This also affects the RCN and is reflected in a waning understanding of infant baptism as a 'boundary marker' or a sign and seal of inclusion in the church as the body of Christ. Infant baptism signifies, first of all, a personal and inclusive relationship with God and is not experienced as a 'boundary' with those who practice adult baptism or with non-Christians. This is also because many parents have friends or family members, who are committed Christians, while choosing adult baptism.
There is also a desire for more experience with respect to the rite of infant baptism, for example, a testimony given by the parents or infant baptism by immersion. In general, there is a shift from a more forensic understanding of baptism (forgiveness of sin, change of ownership, transition from death to life) into an expression of a therapeutic relationship with a caring and loving God and Father. Further, the influence of the Evangelical-Pentecostal movement results in a certain hybridity: the divine initiative in baptism is not denied, but the human choice and experience in baptism take centre stage. This is also reflected in the perception of the church as a warm family in a secular world, in which one finds friends and where children can be brought up safely.
This raises questions about the future of a Reformed theology of infant baptism in the Dutch context:
1. Essential elements of the normative voice of Reformed baptismal theology (washing from sin, being engrafted in Christ's death and resurrection) seem to have little relevance in relation to infant baptism, at least for a number of RCN believers. Can a Reformed theology of infant baptism do without these notions, how does this affect a future baptismal theology of the RCN and what would an appropriated Reformed baptismal narrative be in the Dutch RCN context?
2. How could, or should, the observed 'therapeutic turn' in the appropriation of infant baptism receive a place in the Reformed baptismal narrative? How would this relate to aspects of the baptismal narrative of the RCN (as expressed in the confessions and baptismal forms), such as God's election and being washed by the blood of Christ?
3. In the secularizing Dutch society, ordinary believers and trained theologians of the RCN show a growing desire for more experience and embodiment, which shapes especially the appropriation of infant baptism by ordinary believers. How does this relate to infant baptism as a sacrament, in and through which God is acting? How could or should Reformed aspects of the theology of infant baptism, such as baptism as a sacrament, a sign and seal of God's covenantal promises, function in a fresh baptismal narrative? How could the desire for more spirituality and experience of divine presence be related to the Reformed notion that renewal by the Holy Spirit is promised at baptism?

6. Appropriation of Infant Baptism by Calvin in Geneva

The main question of this research is: 'What does the appropriation of infant baptism by Reformed believers in different contexts teach us about the possibilities and challenges for doing Reformed theology interculturally today?' This positions this research in the discipline of intercultural theology. Having described and analysed the appropriation of infant baptism by Reformed believers in North India, Central Malawi and the Netherlands today (synchronic), this chapter is dedicated to the appropriation of infant baptism in the historical context of Calvin's Geneva (diachronic).
Jean Calvin (1509-1564) was a Reformer of the second generation who could creatively build on the work of other Reformers (for example, Luther, Melanchthon and Farel) to develop his theology and worldview, which he strived to implement in the city of Geneva. The retrieval or *'ressourcement'* of the gospel of grace was for the Reformer turned humanist (i.e., Calvin), not a repristination of the Church Fathers or the Ancient church, but a re-implementation and actualization of the gospel in the church and in all spheres of life.[1] It was 'a return to authoritative sources for the sake of revitalizing the present.'[2] In this way, his theology and practice of infant baptism took shape in the city of Geneva, among others, while he was also in ongoing discussion with roman Catholic and Anabaptist theologians.
By listening to the voice of Calvin and his appropriation of the theology and practice of infant baptism in the Genevan context, the intercultural conversation receives a historical dimension. While Calvin is certainly not the only progenitor of the Reformed family, he did become very influential through his students, his extensive correspondence with theologians and lay leaders in Europe, as well as through a torrent of publications, which also influenced a number of Reformed confessions.[3] In this way, Calvin's theology and ecclesial practices are continuously part of the conversation in the Reformed family. What makes him interesting as a conversation partner in this research is that, till today, he is perceived as an authoritative Reformed theologian in the three research contexts and, in that sense, he is part of the shared frame of reference connecting the research contexts. He can, therefore, help us to reflect theologically on where the Reformed family is coming from and where it is going.[4]
For these reasons, I wish to describe in this chapter the main aspects of Calvin's theology and practice of infant baptism in and for the city of Geneva.[5] For a good understanding, I will first take a brief look at his ecclesiology and teaching on the sacraments in general, and then I will discuss how

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[1] Jan Koopmans, 'Het oudkerkelijk dogma in de Reformatie, bepaaldelijk bij Calvijn' (Veenman, 1938); E.P. Meijering, *Calvin wider die Neugierde: ein Beitrag zum Vergleich zwischen reformatorischem und patristischem Denken*, Bibliotheca humanistica et reformatorica, vol. 29 (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1980); Johannes van Oort, 'John Calvin and the Church Fathers', in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, ed. Irena Backus, vol. 2 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), 661–700.
[2] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 23.
[3] See for a broader explanation in relation to infant baptism: Lyle D. Bierma, *Font of Pardon and New Life: John Calvin and the Efficacy of Baptism* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2021).
[4] See above § 1.5 for a methodological explanation of the place and function of Calvin's voice in this research.
[5] I am not trying to provide a genealogy of Calvin's theology of baptism, such as has been proposed by others: Egil Grislis, 'Calvin's Doctrine of Baptism', *Church History* 31, no. 1 (1962): 46–65; L. G. M. Alting von Geusau, *Die Lehre von der Kindertaufe bei Calvin* (Bilthoven: Nelissen, 1963); Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 140f; Bryan D. Spinks, 'Calvin's Baptismal Theology and the Making of the Strasbourg and Genevan Baptismal Liturgies 1540 and 1542', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 48, no. 1 (1995): 55–78; John W. Riggs, *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition: A Historical and Practical Theology* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 41f. Recently: Bierma, *Font of Pardon and New Life*.

he appropriated the theology and practice of infant baptism in and for the Reformed church under construction in Geneva.

6.1. The Church as the Workplace of the Holy Spirit

In the Institutes (1559), Calvin characterizes the church as 'the mother of all the godly'. It is the place 'into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith.'[6]
In the Apostles' Creed, the article on the church is followed immediately by the forgiveness of sin.[7] For Calvin, an essential function of the church is proclaiming the forgiveness of sin: it is the place where sinners are received in God's grace.[8] God, as Father, feeds his children through the mother church, which feeds her children with the Word and the sacraments. In the power of the Holy Spirit, the servants of the church offer the promises of the Gospel and daily forgiveness to the believers, through the Word and the sacraments.[9] In this way, God accommodates Himself to our capacity: He does not need these outer means, but sinners do,[10] 'since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh.'[11] Against the Spiritualists of his time, Calvin contends that God binds us to this 'ordinary manner of teaching', in this way teaching us humility and obedience.[12] Church members are urged to live a new life in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Outer church discipline is needed to facilitate the perpetual inner repentance of sinners and their strive for holiness. The church as an outer instrument is fully dependent on the inner work of the Holy Spirit. In this context, Calvin discusses the meaning and function of the sacraments.

6.2. The Sacraments as Signs and Seals of Grace

Calvin defines the sacraments in the Institutes (1559) as follows: '[A sacrament is] an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we, in turn, attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men. Here is another briefer definition: one may call it a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him.'[13]
God gives His grace and promises in the sacraments and the believers, in turn, answer.
According to Calvin, God always used visible elements to reveal himself to his people, such as the tree of life in paradise and the rainbow.[14] A certain parallel is present between the signs and what is signified, such as the cleansing function of water and the washing of sin, but they receive their

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[6] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 1559 ed. (Philadelphia; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), *Inst.* IV.1.1. [*OS* V, 1]
[7] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.1.20. [*OS* V, 23-24]
[8] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.1.23 and 27. [*OS* V, 26 and 28] Also: T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 139.
[9] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.1.22. [*OS* V, 25] See also Calvin, *Inst.* IV.1.4. [*OS* V, 7]
[10] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.1.1. [*OS* V, 1] and IV.1.8. [*OS* V, 12]
[11] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.3. [*OS* V, 260] See on Calvin's theology of the liturgical function of images and sacraments: John D. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Publishing Group, 2003), 133f.
[12] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.1.5. [*OS* V, 286] See also Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.15. [*OS* V, 272]
[13] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.1. [*OS* V, 259]
[14] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.18. [*OS* V, 276] See also: Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 139f. See also: E. A. De Boer, *John Calvin on the Visions of Ezekiel: Historical and Hermeneutical Studies in John Calvin's 'Sermons Inedits', Especially on Ezek. 36-48* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 139f and 143f. Calvin discerns between first order sacraments (Baptism and Lord's Supper) and second order sacraments (such as the rainbow), but both can be used by the church. See Hans Heinrich Wolf, *Die Einheit des Bundes. Das Verhältnis von Altem und Neuem Testament bei Calvin* (Neukirchen: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins Neukirchen Kreis Moers, 1958), 86f.

meaning from the Word.[15] The sacraments are the signs and seals of the gracious covenantal promises, a gift of the Holy Spirit, which must be received in faith, and should be responded to in daily life with God.[16] Divine promise and human answer are essential elements in Calvin's understanding of the sacraments. In his commentary on 2 Sam. 6, he writes: 'God comes down to us so that then we might go up to him. That is why the sacraments are compared to the steps of a ladder. For as I have said, if we want to go there — alas, we who do not have wings — we are so small that we cannot make it. God, therefore, must come down to seek us. But when he has come down, it is not to make us dull-witted; it is not to make us imagine that he is like us. Rather, it is so that we might go up little by little, by degrees, as we climb up a ladder one rung at a time.'[17]

6.2.1. Word and Sacrament

The preaching of the Word has a certain primacy over the sacraments. Calvin calls the sacraments an appendix to the Word.[18] Without the Word, the sacraments become empty signs, but together with the Word, they are effective instruments of the Holy Spirit.[19] 'The sacrament requires preaching to beget faith.'[20]

The sacraments are instituted by God to guarantee the promise of the Word. They are like the ratification of a covenant, the seals on an official document, they announce and tell and ratify God's goodness in Christ to us.[21] Even more: in the sacraments, God reveals his grace to believers in a special way: 'by them, He manifests himself to us (…) and attests his goodwill and love toward us more expressly than by the Word'.[22] The sacraments are not just signs, but they 'bring the clearest promises, and they have this characteristic over and above the Word because they represent them for us as painted in a picture from life'.[23] Just as a building standing on a foundation (Word) will be stronger if it is supported by pillars (sacraments).[24]

6.2.2. Outer Means as Divine Aid

Sacraments are a divine aid for believers: in the sacraments, God accommodates himself to our human capacities, to help us in our weakness because of our sinful condition, but also because of our limitations as finite creatures.[25] Already before the fall, God used visible 'outward' signs, such as the tree of life.[26] After the fall, we are even more in need of such outward signs.[27] The sacraments are ordained by God; we may trust that God acts in and through them: '[We believe that] He who makes us sharers in his [Christ's] death, who deprives Satan of his rule, who weakens the power of our lust; indeed, that it is he who comes into a unity with us so that, having put on Christ, we may be acknowledged God's children.'[28] The Holy Spirit uses ordinary people and simple earthly elements

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[15] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.2. [*OS* V, 286] See also Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.15. [*OS* V, 272]
[16] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.18. [*OS* V, 276] See Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture*, Revised and Expanded ed. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 18.
[17] Cited after: Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 135.
[18] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.3. [*OS* V, 260] See also: Wolf, *Einheit*, 88.
[19] See also Calvin, Sermon XL on Eph. 5:26. [*CO* 51:751-752]
[20] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.4. [*OS* V, 261]
[21] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.17. [*OS* V, 274]
[22] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.6. [*OS* V, 263]
[23] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.5. [*OS* V, 262]
[24] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.6. [*OS* V, 263]
[25] See also: Jean Calvin, 'Catechism of the Church of Geneva', in *Tracts Containing Treatises on the Sacraments, Catechism of the Church of Geneva, Forms of Prayer, A Confession of Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 2, Tracts Relating to the Reformation (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin translation society, 1844), 84. [*OS* II, 130-131]
[26] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.18. [*OS* V, 276]
[27] De Boer writes: 'God's accommodation to our finite capacities as creatures is dominated by the stress on our sinful limitations' (Boer, *John Calvin on the Visions of Ezekiel*, 145.)
[28] Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.15.14 and IV.14.17. [*OS* V, 295 and *OS* IV, 274-275]

such as bread, wine and water, to work faith and to assure us of His presence.[29] Through these outer means, God fosters and strengthens our faith in a mysterious way in the union with Christ.[30]

6.2.3. Powerful Through the Holy Spirit

Against the Roman Catholic position, Calvin makes it clear that sacraments have no power in themselves (no *'ex opere operato'*).[31] Baptism is neither causal nor instrumental in infused grace *('gratia infusa'*)', but cognitive as well as experiential: it gives believers a true understanding of Christ's sacrifice for them, the forgiveness of sin and the sanctification through the Holy Spirit, it comforts and assures the believers of God's grace, seals God's covenantal promises, and incorporates the child in the communion of Jesus Christ.[32]

The Holy Spirit and the ministers in the church work in a parallel way: the minister works with the Word and the sacraments as the 'external teacher'.[33] At the same time, the Holy Spirit is the divine Person through which God is working in the believer. The Spirit, as the inward teacher, penetrates the heart, moves affections and opens human souls.[34] The Spirit unites the believer with Christ and applies to the believer the effect of Christ's death and resurrection in baptism.[35] Sometimes the sacraments serve to foster, confirm and increase the knowledge of Christ our Saviour. Sometimes believers receive the sacrament to possess Christ more fully and to enjoy his riches. However, sacraments also help us move forward in the faith.[36] The sacrament is a true instrument of the Holy Spirit, as Van der Kooi writes: 'The Holy Spirit, therefore, sees to it that what is outwardly signified reaches the believer inwardly'.[37] Calvin also points to this mystery: 'I rather experience than understand it'.[38]

6.3. The 16th-Century Religious Context of Calvin's Doctrine of Baptism

Calvin's theology of baptism was developed against the backdrop of (a) the theology and practice in the Roman Catholic church, (b) popular beliefs, and in discussion with (c) Anabaptists[39] and (d) Lutherans (Westphal). We should also realize that the theological discussions and positions were affected by the political situation of competing city-states, the threat of persecution by Roman Catholics and conflicts among competing Protestant theological opinions. Therefore, the implementation of the reformation of infant baptism in Geneva was a process.[40]

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[29] See also § 6.3 below.

[30] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.1.1. [*OS* V, 1]

[31] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.20-22 [*OS* V, 300-303] and *Inst.* IV.16.9. [*OS* V, 312-313] See also: Willem Balke, *Calvijn en de Doperse radicalen* (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1977), 108; Wim Janse, 'The Controversy between Westphal and Calvin on Infant Baptism, 1555-1556', *Perichoresis* 6, no. 1 (2008): esp. 20f. Also: C. van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God: A Diptych* (Leiden; Boston, Mass.: Brill, 2005), 204f.

[32] Jean Calvin, 'Form of Administering Baptism', in *Tracts Containing Treatises on the Sacraments, Catechism of the Church of Geneva, Forms of Prayer, A Confession of Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 2, Tracts Relating to the Reformation (Edinburgh: Calvin translation society, 1844), 115–16. [*OS* II, 33-34] Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 139.

[33] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.17. [*OS* V, 275]

[34] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.10. [*OS* V, 267]

[35] Calvin, *Inst.* III.1.3. [*OS* IV, 3-5]

[36] Calvin, 'Genevan Catechism', 85–86. [*OS* II, 131-132]

[37] van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 220.

[38] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.17.32. [*OS* V, 390]

[39] I use the broad term 'Anabaptist' for the broad and diverse group of the 'Radical Reformation'. See George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed. (Kirksville, Mo: Truman State Univ Press, 2000), ch. 11.

[40] Susan Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual: An Interpretation of Early Modern Germany* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 64; Karen E. Spierling, 'Daring Insolence toward God? The Perpetuation of Catholic Baptismal Traditions in Sixteenth-Century Geneva', *Archiv Für Reformationsgeschichte* 93 (2002): 97–125.

6.3.1. Cleansing and Baptism

The Roman Catholic understanding of baptism made it indispensable for salvation. As long as the child was not baptized, it was under God's curse because of original sin and vulnerability to the power of demons, illness and death.[41] Children who died unbaptized would go to limbo, instead of to heaven. This was, of course, a strong incitement to baptize a child as early as possible. In case of emergency, baptism by a midwife or someone else was accepted.[42] In the Middle Ages, infant baptism in Western Europe had become surrounded by additional rituals to exorcise evil spirits, such as the sign of the cross and 'exsufflation', which is to touch the infant's ears and nose with spittle. Also, the baptismal water was sanctified and exorcised. Salt was placed in the mouth of the child, as a sign of cleansing. After baptism, the child was anointed with holy oil (chrism). This symbolized the descent of the Holy Spirit, who would enable the child to bring forth the fruits of the baptismal washing. In this way, baptism was a ritual cleansing, which re-established the relation between the Creator and the creature and chased away the demons.[43]

In popular piety, people were gripped by the fear of Satan and demons. Satan was the ruler of hell and the only way to evade eternal punishment by Satan was through the church, its clergy and its sacraments. This gave the church and the sacraments tremendous esteem and power. In popular religion, it was believed that soothsayers, witches and midwives were able to keep demons and evil forces away, and newborns were protected by binding protecting herbs in their clothes — but the church also claimed this authority and protection.[44] To ordinary people, the main goal of baptism was to save the child from hell by purifying it from original sin and to free it from the power of evil spirits — in short: 'to beat the Devil'.[45]

6.3.2. Involving the Parents

Parents were typically absent at baptism. Popular superstition would have people believe that the presence of the parents, the father, in particular, was harmful, perhaps because they had been involved in the 'unclean' sexual act, which led to the conception of the child.[46] Normally the midwife, the godparents, friends and relatives would bring the newborn to the church or, in the case of the child being ill, or the weather too cold, the child would be baptized at home. At baptism, the questions were directed at the child, but the godparents would answer in its stead. The child would also receive its name, which was usually the name of one of the godparents. In this way, kinship was assured.[47]

Apart from this, baptism was performed without baptismal instruction to the parents, there was no sermon and, last but not least: the liturgy would be in Latin ('*hocus pocus*'). The result was, according to Calvin, that people used the sacraments in a superstitious way, without understanding what was promised by God and without the need for personal faith or renewal through the Holy Spirit. The additional rituals deformed and blurred the real meaning of baptism.[48] There was no attention to the Christian life of the parents or the responsibility to raise the child in the faith.[49] In

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[41] Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual*, 44f.

[42] Spierling, 'Daring Insolence toward God?', 101f. See also: Elsie Anne McKee, *The Pastoral Ministry and Worship in Calvin's Geneva* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2016), 391f.

[43] Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 10f.

[44] Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual*, 60f; 69.

[45] In this section, I follow: Karant-Nunn, ch. 2.

[46] McKee, *Pastoral Ministry*, 392.

[47] Karen E. Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva: The Shaping of a Community, 1536-1564* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 65f.; Susan Karant-Nunn, '"Suffer the Little Children to Come unto Me, and Forbid Them Not": The Social Location of Baptism in Early Modern Germany', in *Continuity and Change: The Harvest of Late Medieval and Reformation History: Studies in Honor of Heiko A. Oberman on His Seventieth Birthday*, eds Andrew C. Gow and Bast, Robert J. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 360–61.

[48] Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.14.4 / 7. [*OS* V, 261 / 263-265] See also: Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 258f.

[49] Calvin, Commentary on Acts 10:37 [*CO* 48:245]

those days, 'Evil spirits were chased out of the child, but the Holy Spirit was not invoked to take their place.'[50]

6.3.3. Dispute with the Anabaptists

During his Strasbourg years (1538-1541), Calvin had many discussions with Anabaptist pastors. His wife was the widow of an Anabaptist pastor and, perhaps also through her, he received insights into the Anabaptist way of thinking.[51] Anabaptists practised adult baptism and the Lord's Supper, but they typically rejected the idea that God works through the sacraments. Instead, they understood these rites as mere human vows and oaths: a human sign of a human act.[52] They stressed the immediate, spiritual work of the Holy Spirit in the heart, while the visible signs are mere human testimonies: God works directly and spiritually, without using outward means.[53] Calvin and the Reformers see the sacraments, first of all, as means of grace, instituted by God as seals of his Word, in which the focus is on forgiveness of sin and communion with Christ.[54] A significant underlying difference was that the Reformed theologians stress the *'sola gratia'* as reflected in infant baptism, while the Anabaptists cling to a human decision in conversion before baptism.[55] For Calvin, baptism is not first of all the promise of the believer, but a means of grace. It is God's voice and an act of signifying and sealing: while the 'sacrament' was [originally] the soldier's act of vowing himself to his commander, they [Latin church fathers] made it the commander's act of receiving soldiers into the ranks. For, by the sacraments, the Lord promises that 'he will be our God and we shall be his people.'[56]

6.4. Calvin's Theology of Baptism

I now present a summary of Calvin's theology of baptism, mainly following his 1559 edition of the Institutes.[57]

6.4.1. Sign of Initiation in Church and Christ

Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the visible body of Christ, the church and Christ the Saviour. Calvin writes: 'Baptism is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, so that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children.'[58] In the Genevan Catechism, he states briefly that the meaning of baptism is: forgiveness of sin and regeneration.[59] These are needed because the 'entrance into God's family is not open to us unless we first are cleansed of our filth by his goodness'.[60]

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[50] Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 30.

[51] Ibid., 140. On Calvin's relation to the Anabaptists, see Balke, *Calvijn en de Doperse radicalen*; Galen Johnson, 'The Development of John Calvin's Doctrine of Infant Baptism in Reaction to the Anabaptists', *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73, no. 4 (1999): 803–23.

[52] Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 138.

[53] Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 230 and 237.

[54] Balke, *Calvijn en de Doperse radicalen*, 53,102,108.

[55] This is also called 'decisional regeneration'. See Old, *Worship*, 19.

[56] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.13. [*OS* V, 270] See also: Balke, *Calvijn en de Doperse radicalen*, 224.

[57] Calvin's theology of baptism has been object of research, but questions remain about its consistency, see, for example: B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin*, Cunningham Lectures 1990 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), ch. 4; Spinks, 'Calvin's Baptismal Theology'; Lyle Bierma, 'Baptism as a Means of Grace in Calvin's Theology: A Tentative Proposal', in *Calvinus Sacrarum Literarum Interpres. Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. H. J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 142–48.

[58] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.1. [*OS* V, 285]

[59] Calvin, 'Genevan Catechism', 86; Calvin, 'Catechism', 84. [*OS* II, 133]

[60] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.1.20. [*OS* V, 24]

6.4.2. Trinitarian Act

Baptism is a Trinitarian act: God the Father accepts us in his fatherly care, because of Christ, and promises regeneration through the Holy Spirit. We receive the resurrection and regeneration in Christ through faith, which is worked in us by the Holy Spirit, who gives us a new and spiritual nature.[61] The true meaning of baptism is not in the visible sign but in the spiritual and invisible work of God and especially in Christ's work: 'Thus, the surest argument to refute the self-deception of those who attribute everything to the power of the water can be sought in the meaning of baptism itself, which draws us away, not only from the visible element which meets our eyes, but from all other means, that it may fasten our minds upon Christ alone'.[62] 'Analogy' or 'similitude' says Calvin is 'the surest rule of the sacraments: that we should see spiritual things in the physical, as if set before our very eyes'.[63] As an example, he mentions Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist: the visible dove was an analogy to the invisible reality of the Holy Spirit who came down on Jesus.[64]

6.4.3. Washing of Sin

Pure water, without any additions, should be used for baptism. For Calvin, sprinkling with water was, first of all, a sign of sprinkling of the cleansing blood of Christ, or the pouring of the blood of the new covenant. It points to the sprinkled blood of atonement by which we are cleansed from sin.[65] Secondly, it was a sign of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5; Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28) and his purifying work and points to the gift of a new heart and spirit.[66] The word 'baptism' itself means 'immersion' and points to the death, burial and resurrection with Christ. The spiritual meaning of baptismal immersion is the mortification in Christ and our renewal in Him.[67]
In the Reformed churches in Europe, different baptismal practices existed, often as a continuation of the pre-Reformation practice. In Geneva and other Reformed cities, sprinkling was typically used.[68] Calvin believed that immersion was practised in the Ancient Church, but to him the mode of baptism (partial or full immersion, pouring or sprinkling) belonged to the *'adiaphora'*.[69] Instead of looking at the outward sign, attention should go to the promise of God in the sacrament.

6.4.4. Union with Christ

In baptism, the justification of the sinner is sealed: the guilt of original sin, which is imputed to us because of Adam's sin, is taken away, even though we always remain sinners.[70] God sees us as righteous in Christ, we are clothed in his holiness. This imputation is possible because we are united with Christ and are members of his Body.[71] Baptism seals the mysterious engrafting in a living

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[61] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.6. [*OS* V, 289]
[62] Ibid., IV.15.2. [*OS* V, 286] See also: Alting von Geusau, *Die Lehre von der Kindertaufe*, 112f. Calvin, Commentary on Acts 1:5 [*CO* 48:6-8]
[63] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.14. [*OS* V, 295]
[64] See for this analogy and the 'instrumentality' of the Holy Spirit: van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 213f.
[65] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.2 and 14. [*OS* V, 286 and 295] See also: Alting von Geusau, *Die Lehre von der Kindertaufe*, 113; Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling*, 109.
[66] See Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 263.
[67] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.5. [*OS* V, 288-289] Old states that, for Calvin, baptism was primarily about cleansing and not the sign of burial or resurrection, which is, in his opinion, based on a misunderstanding of Romans 6. Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 174,276f. While we cannot enter into this debate at this point, we note that Calvin in the Institutes speaks first about cleansing, but also mentions the parallel of burial and resurrection with Christ. However, in his Form of Infant Baptism he explains the meaning of being buried and raised with Christ clearly, which defeats Old's argument to some extent. Calvin, 'Form Baptism', 114. [*OS* II, 32]
[68] Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 254.
[69] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.19. [*OS* V, 300] See also: Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 251f.; 264f.; 276.
[70] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.10. [*OS* V, 292] See also: Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 240.248.
[71] Alting von Geusau, *Die Lehre von der Kindertaufe*, 121.

relationship with Christ or union with Christ.[72] The baptisand is buried and resurrected with Christ (Rom. 6; Col. 2:11–12), the 'old self' dies and the 'new self' is resurrected. In baptism we put on Christ, we are united with Christ and become dead to sin:[73] 'Since the mortification of our nature is its beginning, and our becoming new creatures its end, a figure of death is set before us when the water is poured upon the head, and the figure of a new life when instead of remaining immersed under water, we only enter it for a moment as a kind of grave, out of which we instantly emerge.'[74]

6.4.5. Justification and Sanctification

Justification cannot be separated from regeneration and sanctification, because both are given in the living mystical union with Christ.[75] The Holy Spirit revives us[76] and gradually renews the image of God in us,[77] brings the outward words and sign into our hearts and gives faith.[78] He works the blessing of baptism inside us.[79]

God is 'pleased to wash and purify our souls',[80] but considers his children as righteous and innocent by imputation only.[81] This is not a license to sin — forgiveness is given only to repenting sinners. Baptism is an important weapon for fighting sin: when believers remember God's gracious promise in baptism and cling to communion with Christ, sin will no longer rule or dominate in their lives.[82] We do not need a perfect faith, but a genuine faith, which hungers and thirsts after Christ with 'fervent affection'.[83] God's judgement remains on those who do not repent.[84]

6.4.6. Effective and Indelible

Even though the baptism rite itself does not grant the forgiveness of sin,[85] God does not give empty signs, but the Holy Spirit acts in a parallel way with the visible act of baptism. Baptism is 'such a symbol that reality is at the same time attached to it. For God does not disappoint us when He promises us his gifts. Hence, it is certain that forgiveness of sins and renewal of life is offered to us and received by us in baptism.'[86] In the Institutes, Calvin writes: 'those who receive baptism with right faith truly feel the effective working of Christ's death in the mortification of their flesh, together with the working of his resurrection in the vivification of the Spirit (Romans 6:8).'[87] Baptism has a permanent and indelible character: we are washed from sin once and for all, and from now on Christ lives and works in us: 'For Christ's purity has been offered us in it; his purity ever

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[72] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.1,6; IV.15.12; IV.16.17. [*OS* V, 285.289.293-294.320-321]
[73] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.5-6. [*OS* V, 288-289]
[74] Calvin, 'Genevan Catechism', 86. [*OS* II, 134] See for mortification and the passage through the Red Sea: Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.9. [*OS* V, 291]
[75] Calvin, *Inst.* III.16.1. [*OS* IV, 248-249] See also: J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift. The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 106f.
[76] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.2,5. [*OS* V, 286.288] See also: Alting von Geusau, *Die Lehre von der Kindertaufe*, 113f.
[77] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.11 [*OS* V, 292-293] See also: Calvin, *Inst.*, III.11.10. [*OS* IV, 191-192]
[78] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.10. [*OS* V, 267]
[79] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.6. [*OS* V, 289] See also Calvin's Commentaries on Acts 22:16 [*CO* 48: 496-497], 1Cor. 1:13 (*CO* 29:316-317) and his sermon on Eph. 5:26 [*CO* 51: 751-752]
[80] Calvin, 'Form Baptism', 114. [*OS* II, 32]
[81] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.10. [*OS* V, 292]
[82] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.11-12. [*OS* V, 292-294]
[83] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.8. [*OS* V, 265] and Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.11 [*OS* V, 2992-293]
[84] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.1-4. [*OS* V, 285-288]
[85] Bierma, 'Baptism as a Means of Grace in Calvin's Theology: A Tentative Proposal', 147.
[86] Calvin, 'Genevan Catechism', 86–87. [*OS* II, 134]
[87] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.5. [*OS* V, 288]

flourishes; it is defiled by no spots, but buries and cleanses away all our defilements.'[88] To repeat baptism would deny the assurance of engrafting in Christ and membership of the covenant.[89]

6.4.7. Profession of Faith

Baptism is also an embodied profession of faith: 'Indeed, [baptism] is the mark by which we publicly profess that we wish to be reckoned God's people; by which we testify that we agree in worshipping the same God, in one religion with all Christians; by which finally we openly affirm our faith. Thus, not only do our hearts breathe the praise of God, but our tongues also and all members of our body resound his praise in every way they can.'[90] But even though the aspect of the profession of faith is there, Calvin immediately adds that 'our confidence is in God's mercy, and our purity in forgiveness of sins, which has been procured for us through Jesus Christ'.[91] This avoids any suggestion that the human choice or profession of faith would be the main focus of baptism, as it is God who 'is pleased to incorporate us into his Church by baptism'.[92]

6.5. Calvin's Appropriation of Infant Baptism in Geneva

When Calvin developed his theology and practice of infant baptism in the Genevan context, he was able to profit from the work of earlier Reformers, especially of Zwingli's defence of infant baptism, his teaching of the covenant and the congruence between circumcision and infant baptism.[93] Old writes that Calvin 'basically adopted the arguments of Zwingli, Bullinger, Bucer, and Oecolampadius (…). Calvin has thought through these arguments and presented them in a clearer and more forceful way than any of his predecessors. The way Calvin ordered and balanced the arguments shows his genius as a systematic theologian.'[94]

6.5.1. Initiation into the Church and Christ

Baptism is, first of all, important as a sign of initiation into the church. Calvin believed that the visible church is a mother to the believers: 'For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels.'[95] Baptism signifies that the children of believers belong to Christ and to his Body, the visible church. Calvin writes: 'Baptism is a kind of entrance into the Church; for we have in it a testimony that we who are otherwise strangers and aliens, are received into the family of God, to be counted of his household.'[96] But baptism also teaches us that 'entrance into God's family is not open to us unless we first are cleansed of our filth by his goodness'.[97] Baptism has an ethical and ecclesiological meaning and neglecting or rejecting baptism displays a careless attitude towards the spiritual upbringing of the children in the church. Calvin would state, in line with the church father Cyprian:

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[88] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.3-4. [*OS* V, 286-288]

[89] See for a broader explanation: Paul Leo Voorberg, *Doop en kerk: de erkenning, door kerkelijke gemeenschappen, van de elders bediende doop* (Heerenveen: Groen, 2007), 279–381.

[90] Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.15.13. [*OS* V, 294] See also: Ibid., IV.14.13. [*OS* V, 269-271]

[91] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.15. [*OS* V, 296]

[92] Calvin, 'Form Baptism', 114. [*OS* II, 32]

[93] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.3. [*OS* V, 306-307] See also: W. van 't Spijker, 'De leer van de doop bij Zwingli, Bullinger en Bucer', in *Rondom de doopvont: leer en gebruik van de heilige doop in het Nieuwe Testament en in de geschiedenis van de westerse kerk*, eds W. Balke et al. (Goudriaan: De Groot, 1983), 221–62; Bryan D. Spinks, *Reformation and Modern Rituals and Theologies of Baptism. From Luther to Contemporary Practices* (Aldershot [etc.: Ashgate, 2006), ch. 2.

[94] Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 142.

[95] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.1.4. [*OS* V, 7]

[96] Calvin, 'Genevan Catechism', 86. [*OS* II, 133]

[97] Calvin, *Inst.*, chap. IV.1.20. [*OS* V, 24]

'For what God has joined together, it is not lawful to put asunder (Mark 10:9), so that, for those to whom he is Father the church may also be Mother.'[98]

6.5.2. Children of the Covenant and Blessed by Jesus

The validity of infant baptism is explained by Calvin in the context of the continuity of the Old and New Covenant.[99] Gen. 17:7 is a key reference: the children of believers are recognized by God as his children, children of the covenant, because of the faith of their parents.[100] Referring to Acts 2:39 and Acts 3:25, Calvin states that the blessings of the Gospel now belong to the gentile Christians and their children as well. God gathers a people throughout history and not just individuals. In the New Testament, too, children are sanctified in the believing parents (1Cor. 7:14).[101]

In line with the Medieval church, the Reformers also referred to the story where the Lord Jesus blessed the children (Mat. 19:13–15). By calling the children to himself, Jesus shows that He gives the children life by allowing them to partake of himself.[102] Christ's embrace in Mat. 19 is the true token of the adoption of the children. If the Lord Jesus embraced them, how could we exclude them from baptism as the visible symbol of fellowship and community with Christ? [103]

Referring to Col. 2,11–12, Calvin identified baptism as the circumcision of Christ, which shows the congruence between circumcision and baptism.[104] In the Old Testament, the newborn boys were circumcised and it would be inconceivable to think that God's grace in the New Testament would be limited by excluding the children from the covenant and forgiveness.[105] The signs are different, but the covenantal promises are the same: God's fatherly favour, the forgiveness of sin, and eternal life.[106] In infant baptism, Calvin preached the gospel of the heavenly Father who adopts us in his grace: 'For how sweet is it to godly minds to be assured, not only by word but by sight that they obtain so much favour with the Heavenly Father that their offspring are within his care? For here we can see how he takes on toward us the role of a most provident Father, who even after our death maintains his care for us, providing for and looking after our children.'[107]

6.5.3. Saved by Election

Children are by nature, as are all humans, under God's curse. Little children don't sin knowingly, but they are guilty in Adam and need forgiveness of sins. Therefore, they need to be baptized as a sign of forgiveness, mortification, rebirth into a new life and fellowship with Christ.[108] The blood of Christ, symbolized in baptism, protects the child against God's anger over sin.[109] While the child cannot make any contribution to its salvation, it still receives baptism.[110] In line with Luther and Zwingli, Calvin believes that the beginning of the covenant and the Christian church is not to be found in our

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[98] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.1.1. [*OS* V, 1-2]

[99] See for an extensive explanation: Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001), 249f.

[100] Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.16.6 /IV.16.12 /IV.16.24. [*OS* V, 309-310; 315-316; 328-329] See also: Alting von Geusau, *Die Lehre von der Kindertaufe*, 155.

[101] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.15. [*OS* V, 318]

[102] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.17. [*OS* V, 320]

[103] Calvin, IV.16.7. [*OS* V, 310-311] and Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.31. [*OS* V, 337] See also: Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 87f; Bierma, *Font of Pardon and New Life*, 164–65.

[104] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.6. [*OS* V, 310] Wolf, *Einheit*, 88f. speaks about '*völlige Kongruenz*'. See also: Balke, *Calvijn en de Doperse radicalen*, 102.

[105] Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.16.3. [*OS* V, 306-307] and Ibid., IV.16.6. [*OS* V, 309-310]

[106] Calvin, chap. IV.16.4. [*OS* V, 308] See also: Ibid., 41.

[107] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.32. [*OS* V, 341]. I thank prof dr. Erik de Boer for suggesting to pay attention to the aspect of adoption in Calvin's baptismal theology.

[108] Ibid., IV.16.1. [*OS* V, 303-305] and Ibid., IV.16.22. [*OS* V, 326-327]

[109] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.9. [*OS* V, 291-292]

[110] Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 139.

human choice, but in God's gracious election, the promises of his Fatherly love, the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.[111] In infant baptism, we also see the prevalence of God's grace: God is the author of our salvation and election: 'in the elect alone the sacraments effect what they represent.'[112]

6.5.4. Born Sinners or Born Holy?

Calvin is not optimistic about the natural state of our human existence. Because of Adam's sin, all newborn children inherit a depraved and corrupted nature, they need cleansing, forgiveness and imputation of the righteousness of Christ.[113] However, there is a triumph of grace in Calvin's theology.[114] He calls the children of believers 'heirs of the covenant', 'holy' and 'holy seed'[115]: 'although those who are born of believers may by nature be lost, they are holy by supernatural grace (1Cor. 7:14)'.[116] He can even contend that the children of believers are born holy.[117] This is also a warrant for infant baptism: 'But if God has adopted them into his kingdom, how great injustice is done to his promise, as if it were not of itself sufficient for their salvation!'[118]

The reason for the holiness of the children 'flows from the covenant, by the supervening of which the curse of nature is destroyed, and those who were by nature unholy are consecrated to God by grace'.[119] Baptism assures the parents that 'the Lord of his own mercy considers them righteous and innocent'. This is imputed grace, because, even though the children are and will be sinners, and are guilty from the outset, God sees them as holy in Christ, because He justifies the children.[120] On the matter of children who die unbaptized in infancy, Calvin writes: 'God declares that he adopts our babies as his own before they are born when he promises that he will be our God and the God of our descendants after us [Genesis 17:7]. Their salvation is embraced in this word.'[121]

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[111] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.4. [*OS* V, 308]

[112] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.15. [*OS* V, 272] See for a discussion on the tensions related to election in Calvin's baptism theology: Grislis, 'Calvin's Doctrine of Baptism'.

[113] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.10 / IV.16.17 / IV.16.22. [*OS* V, 292 / 320-321 / 326-327] See also: Anthony N.S. Lane, 'Anthropology', in *The Calvin Handbook*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), chap. 6.2.3.

[114] Allusion to the title of the Dutch theologian G.C. Berkouwer's classical study on Karl Barth.

[115] Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.16.6 / IV.16.14 / IV.16.31. [*OS* V, 309-310 / 317-318 / 336-340]

[116] Ibid., chap. IV.16.31. [*OS* V, 337] See also: Ibid., IV.16.15. [*OS* V, 318-319]

[117] Jean Calvin, 'Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote', in *Calvin's Tracts Containing Antidote to the Council of Trent, German Interim with Refutation and True Method of Reforming the Church, Conforming to Roman Rites; Psychopannychia or Imaginary Sleep of the Soul between Death and Judgment*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 3 (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin translation society, 1844), 109. [*CO* 7, 443]

[118] Ibid. [*CO* 7, 443] See also Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.7 and 9. [*OS* V, 310-311 and 312-313] Also: Jean Calvin, 'The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and of Reforming the Church and Appendix to the Tract', in *Calvin's Tracts Containing Antidote to the Council of Trent, Germen Interim with Refutation and True Method of Reforming the Church, Conforming to Roman Rites; Psychopannychia or Imaginary Sleep of the Soul between Death and Judgment*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 3 (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin translation society, 1844), 275. [*CO* 7, 619]

[119] Calvin, 'True Method', 348. [*CO* 7, 678]

[120] Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.15.10 and IV.16.17. [*OS* V, 292 and 320-321]

[121] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.20. [*OS* V, 301] See also: Jean Calvin, 'Articles Agreed Upon by the Faculty of Sacred Theology of Paris, in Reference to Matters of Faith at Present Controverted with the Antidote.', in *Tracts Relating to the Reformation by John Calvin, with His Life by Theodore Beza*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 1, Tracts Relating to the Reformation (Edinburgh: Calvin translation society, 1844), 74. [*CO* 7, 7-8]

6.5.5. Union with Christ

The core of infant baptism is the union with Christ, which is expressed in both circumcision and baptism.[122] The foundation of both signs is Christ,[123] and the spiritual truth of the signs, the inner mystery, remains the same in the Old and New Testament: the forgiveness of sin.[124] Through the Spirit, children are engrafted in Christ and receive new life, so that they can enter the Kingdom of God.[125] In his Tract on the Reformation of the church, Calvin characterises baptism as 'the washing of regeneration, by which we put on Christ, the testimony of our adoption, the entrance into the kingdom of God, ablution in the blood of Christ, the commencement of new and eternal life.'[126] Receiving baptism does not guarantee that children will become believers, but when children do not come to faith at a later age and reject God's grace, this does not make baptism invalid or pointless. About the regeneration of children who die in infancy, Calvin believed that God will realize the spiritual significance of baptism and regeneration in the child as He foresees.[127] Calvin somewhat confusingly writes that the seed of conversion and regeneration 'by the secret operation of the Spirit already lies hidden in the children'.[128] However, this seed is not something like eternal life that is implanted in the heart and will grow later. Instead, Calvin is thinking of the seed of future repentance and faith, which is not a possession of the child, but a possibility graciously given in baptism and the promise of the Holy Spirit. 'Planting and germination are not the same thing, of course, but they involve the same seed.'[129] In the words of Bierma: 'infant baptism is an instrument with a delayed efficacy'.[130]

6.5.6. Comfort for Parents and Children

There is also a pastoral and experiential motive to infant baptism. Many infants died at a young age, and it was important for the church to comfort the parents. In the Roman Catholic church, the comfort was in the rite of baptism itself: through the performance of baptism, the child was believed to be saved. The Anabaptists approached the question differently. Some of them said that children who died in infancy are saved because little children are still innocent, while others would contend that we cannot say anything about the fate of these children.[131]

For Calvin, there is no reason to doubt the salvation of unbaptised children who die in infancy.[132] Infant baptism is not a means of salvation, but a means of grace, as it makes God's gracious promises visible and tangible to the parents and the church.[133] Calvin writes: 'Baptism is not administered to infants that they might become sons and heirs of God; but, because they already are reckoned by God to that place and rank, the grace of adoption is sealed in their flesh by baptism. (…) If anyone would deny them baptism, we have an instant reply: they are already in Christ's flock and God's family, since the covenant of salvation which God contracts with the faithful, is also

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[122] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.2. [*OS* V, 305-306]
[123] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.3. [*OS* V, 306-307]
[124] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.4. [[*OS* V, 308] See also: Wolf, *Einheit*, 89.
[125] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.17. [*OS* V, 320-321] See also: Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 142.
[126] Calvin, 'True Method', 288; Jean Calvin, *Calvin's Tracts Containing Antidote to the Council of Trent, German Interim with Refutation and True Method of Reforming the Church, Conforming to Roman Rites; Psychopannychia or Imaginary Sleep of the Soul between Death and Judgment*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 3 (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin translation society, 1844), 288. [*CO* 7, 629]
[127] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.21. [*OS* V, 325-326] See also: Spinks, *Reformation and Modern Rituals and Theologies of Baptism*, 41.
[128] Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.16.20. [*OS* V, 324] See also: Alting von Geusau, *Die Lehre von der Kindertaufe*, 146.
[129] Bierma, *Font of Pardon and New Life*, 163.
[130] Ibid., 166.
[131] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Volume 4: Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (University of Chicago Press, 1985), 318.
[132] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.20 / IV.16.26. [*OS* V, 300-301 / 331]
[133] Bierma, *Font of Pardon and New Life*, 165f.

common to their children. Just as the words say, "I will be your God and the God of your seed".'[134] Assurance of God's promises is the anchor for parents, evokes gratitude in their hearts[135] and calls their children to respond in faith.[136] Infant baptism is also important for the children as they grow up and become aware of God's grace, which precedes their faith in God as Father.[137]

6.6. Renewal of the Baptismal Practice

The Reformers wanted to restore the liturgical form of the sacraments to their original simplicity.[138] This led to a Scriptural explanation of the meaning of baptism in the sermon and the baptismal form. It also required the presence of the parents and the congregation at baptism.

6.6.1. 'The Devil and his Whole Dominion'[139]

In his book on the Reformation of the baptismal rite, Old writes about the Roman Catholic rite of baptism: 'the whole service gave the impression of being a long series of exorcisms concluded by a baptism'.[140] This was a Medieval appropriation of the practice of the Early Church, about which the church historian Peter Brown writes: 'Salvation meant, first and foremost, salvation from idolatry and from the power of demons… To Christians, all gods were demons, they were evil, but nobody denied their existence'.[141]

Calvin rejected all additional rituals which were added to baptism, such as the sanctification of the baptismal water and anointment with oil (chrism). Especially all forms of exorcism were abolished.[142] There was an important theological reason for this: these rituals contradict the conviction that newborn children are already in the covenant.[143] Covenant children do not need to be set free from Satan, demons or evil spirits, because they are already God's children, belong to the covenant and are sanctified in the believing parents (1Cor. 7:14).[144]

However, Calvin did not deny that believers still have to fight Satan. In his Form of Baptism, Calvin states: 'We have in baptism sure evidence, first, that God is willing to be propitious to us, not imputing to us our faults and offences; and, secondly, that he will assist us by his Holy Spirit, so that we may be able to war against the devil, sin, and the lusts of our flesh, and gain the victory over them…'[145] Humans are responsible and accountable to fight sin and Satan, but we can only do this through the power of the Holy Spirit.

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[134] In a letter to the Frankfurt magistrate John Clauberger (1556), cited after: Riggs, *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition*, 64. Also: Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.15.20-22 / IV.16.5-6. [*OS* V, 300-303 / 308-310], [*OS* II, 33] See also: Spinks, 'Calvin's Baptismal Theology', 75; Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 89f; 115.

[135] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.32. [*OS* V, 340-341]

[136] Spinks, 'Calvin's Baptismal Theology', 72–73.

[137] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.9 and IV.16.21. [*OS* V, 312-313 and 325-326]

[138] Calvin, 'Form Baptism', 118. [*OS* II, 38]

[139] The expression is from final prayer in the classical baptismal form: Canadian Reformed Churches, *Book of Praise*, 587.

[140] Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 10f; Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual*, 43f. See also Calvin, 'Form Baptism', 118. [*OS* II, 38]

[141] Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 65f.

[142] Spierling, 'Daring Insolence toward God?', 100; Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual*, 50f; Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 260f.

[143] Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 285.

[144] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.20 and 22. [*OS* V, 300-301 and 302-303] See also Calvin's Commentary on 1Cor. 7:14 [CO 49:411-413]

[145] Calvin, 'Form Baptism', 114–15. [*OS* II, 32]

6.6.2. Parental Responsibility

The parents' active membership in the church was key to Calvin's baptismal practice, and they were expected to take responsibility for bringing up their children in the faith and for teaching them to live in the covenant.[146] The validity of infant baptism hinges on God's covenantal promises. But these promises are received through the faith of the parents, as the children are sanctified in the believing parents (1Cor. 7:14). Instead of asking the baby if it wanted to be baptized (as was done in the Roman Catholic church), the pastor addresses the parents and asks them to make vows about the Christian education of their children.[147] This was a true revolution in the practice of baptism.[148] Baptism should also be administered in the presence of the whole congregation because children are also given to, and recommended to, the congregation. This was a real change in comparison with the Roman Catholic practice of that time.[149] The final baptismal prayer was said by the whole congregation, which reflects Calvin's conviction that the church should indeed function as a mother to the believers and their children. In this way, there is both an individual and communal responsibility before God.[150]

As children grow up, they will be encouraged by God's grace that they were already assured of their adoption before they were able to recognize the love of the Father.[151] God's promise is foremost, but without the vow of the parents, infant baptism would lose its covenantal meaning, as the baptisand is called to a responsible Christian life in church and society. Infant baptism functions as a visible encouragement for the parents to bring up their children in the faith.[152]

In Geneva, the father had to take responsibility for the financial and practical support of the child. Fathers who did not appear at baptism had to appear before the Genevan city council. In the Roman Catholic church, the names of the parents were not registered. Sometimes baptism in the Reformed church was delayed to identify the father of a child.[153] The government only wanted to make sure that the child and mother were cared for.[154]

Apart from that, in principle, only children of believing parents could be baptized and the father was expected to show through his presence that he did not reject the faith or despise baptism.[155] In practice, Calvin and his colleagues allowed the godparents and the grandparents to substitute for absent fathers and take responsibility for the upbringing of the child.[156] However, it took a long time to install this practice.[157]

6.7. Believing, Belonging, Behaving and Experiencing

Finally, I would like to systematize the description of Calvin's appropriation of infant baptism according to the BBBE model of appropriation. Of course, the sort of data from this description of Calvin's appropriation in Geneva is different from the data of the field research, but the themes are comparable and for the purpose of using the data for the intercultural theological conversation in

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[146] Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva*, 58.
[147] Ibid., 91f.
[148] Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling*, 106–7.
[149] McKee, *Pastoral Ministry*, 422f.
[150] Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling*, 106–7.
[151] Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.16.9 and IV.16.21. [*OS* V, 312-313 and 325-326] Also: Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 201f.
[152] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.32. [*OS* V, 340-341]
[153] Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva*, 83; 89; Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual*, 229.
[154] Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva*, 159f.
[155] McKee, *Pastoral Ministry*, 414f.
[156] The question of baptizing illegitimate babies is discussed in: Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva*, chap. 5; McKee, *Pastoral Ministry*, 408f.
[157] Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva*, 91; Spierling, 'Daring Insolence toward God?'; Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual*, 62.

the next chapter, it is useful to indicate how Calvin's appropriation of infant baptism in the Genevan context relates to the aspects of believing, belonging, behaving and experiencing.

6.7.1. Believing

Infant baptism is God's ordination for the children of the covenant and replaces the Old Testament sign of circumcision. Children share in original sin, but God promises forgiveness of sin and sanctification in Christ, i.e., dying to sin with Christ and being resurrected with Him to a new life, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Infant baptism mirrors the *sola gratia* of the Reformation: a child receives grace even before it can ask for it. Baptism is a means of grace, a public sign and seal of God's adoption and gracious promises of being engrafted into Christ. It is not a mere sign or illustration, but a seal,[158] a 'performative' act from God. Calvin says in a sermon on Deuteronomy 34:9: '…in baptism we receive truly the forgiveness of sins, we are washed and cleansed with the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are renewed by the operation of his Holy Spirit. And how so? Does a little water have such power when it is cast upon the head of a child? No. But because it is the will of our Lord Jesus Christ that the water should be a visible sign of his blood and of the Holy Ghost. Therefore, baptism has that power, and whatsoever is there set forth to the eye, is forthwith accomplished in very deed.'[159]

Because it conveys God's trustworthy promise, baptism has an indelible character: the children remain sinners, but God's promises of justification and sanctification through the work of the Holy Spirit remain valid always. The promises are realized in the elect children of God, in the resurrection.

6.7.2. Belonging

Infant baptism is a sign of commitment from God, to the parents, as well as to the community of the church. Firstly, children are sanctified in the believing parents and as members of the covenant; they receive the sign and seal of adoption as children of their heavenly Father and of the engrafting into a living relationship with Christ and sharing in His death and resurrection. In a sermon on Gen. 17, Calvin states: '…the promise of this adoption which He makes is not in vain, when He offers salvation to all who were circumcised in the time of the law, and to those who are baptized today. When He declares that He is their Father and receives them as members of His household that is not in vain for, until they have made themselves unworthy, they are household members of the church. (…) So let us note well that all those who come forth from a holy lineage are blessed by God and are exempt of God's curse, not by nature (as we have said) but by a special privilege. That is why baptism is the mark of God and of His grace.'[160]

Secondly, even though children already belong to the covenant and to the church before baptism (no emergency baptisms needed!), they ought to be baptized in the presence of the parents (the fathers in particular) and the congregation. The church asked the vows from the father, in particular, for the upbringing of the child. The child is not yet able to express its needs but is brought into the community of the church. This signifies and seals the relation with God, but also with the parents, family, neighbours or sponsors, church and state.

6.7.3. Behaving

Children of believers ought to be baptized because infant baptism is the ordained sign of God's covenantal love and election. The Lord Jesus calls the children and parents should not neglect to bring their children and should take public responsibility for a Christian upbringing. Even though immersion was probably the mode of baptism in the Early Church, how baptism is administered is not essential. Important is sound instruction of parents and congregation on the meaning of

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[158] Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.14.17 / IV.14.4. [*OS* V, 274-275 / 261-262] Also: Spinks, *Reformation and Modern Rituals and Theologies of Baptism*, 41f.

[159] Cited after Bierma, *Font of Pardon and New Life*, 173. See also: Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.10. [*OS* V, 267]

[160] Cited after McKee, *Pastoral Ministry*, 413.

baptism. Baptism is unrepeatable: belonging to the covenant, the church and Christ is promised once and for all, and should be accepted in faith and repentance.

6.7.4. Experiencing

Calvin writes: 'We who have experienced [the sacraments] feel [these] to be highly useful aids to foster and strengthen faith'.[161] Christ works in our hearts through the Holy Spirit in an immediate way, and He also wants to strengthen our faith through the outer means of the sacraments in a mysterious way. Infant baptism is a joy and encouragement for the parents, as it shows God's undeserved forgiveness, loving adoption and Fatherly care for their children when they grow up: 'God's boundless generosity is showing itself there, first gives men ample occasion to proclaim his glory, then floods godly hearts with uncommon happiness, which quickens men to a deeper love of their kind Father, as they see his concern on their behalf for their posterity.'[162]

6.8. Calvin's Baptismal Narrative in the Genevan Context

Calvin's appropriation of infant baptism can be summarized in a 'baptismal narrative':

Baptism was instituted by Christ and functions as a sacrament of initiation into the covenant and the church. The baptismal water is a symbol of God's grace, a sign and seal of the washing of sin by the blood of Christ and it shows the engrafting into a living relationship with Christ by participating in his death (mortification) and resurrection (vivification). Children are regenerated by the Holy Spirit and saved at the time ordained by God, which is a comfort for parents, even when a child dies in infancy. (believing)

Children ought to be baptized as a public sign of adoption as 'holy seed', as children of their heavenly Father, belonging to the church as a mother. Through infant baptism, the child is privileged to hear the Word and to be placed on the road of Christian life in the community of the church. Infant baptism has a permanent value because the baptismal promises of being in Christ, forgiveness of sin and the work of the Holy Spirit remain valid for the whole life. (belonging)

Parents take responsibility to raise their children in a Christian way. When they grow up, children are called to respond to God's promises in faith and must resist the attacks of Satan and the lusts of the flesh. (behaving)

God's care for the little children, his forgiveness, adoption and Fatherly love are a cause of joy and encouragement for the parents, and evoke love for God in their hearts. (experiencing)

[161] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.1.1. [*OS* V, 1]
[162] Ibid., chap. IV.16.9. [*OS* V, 312-313]

This narrative can be outlined in the following way:

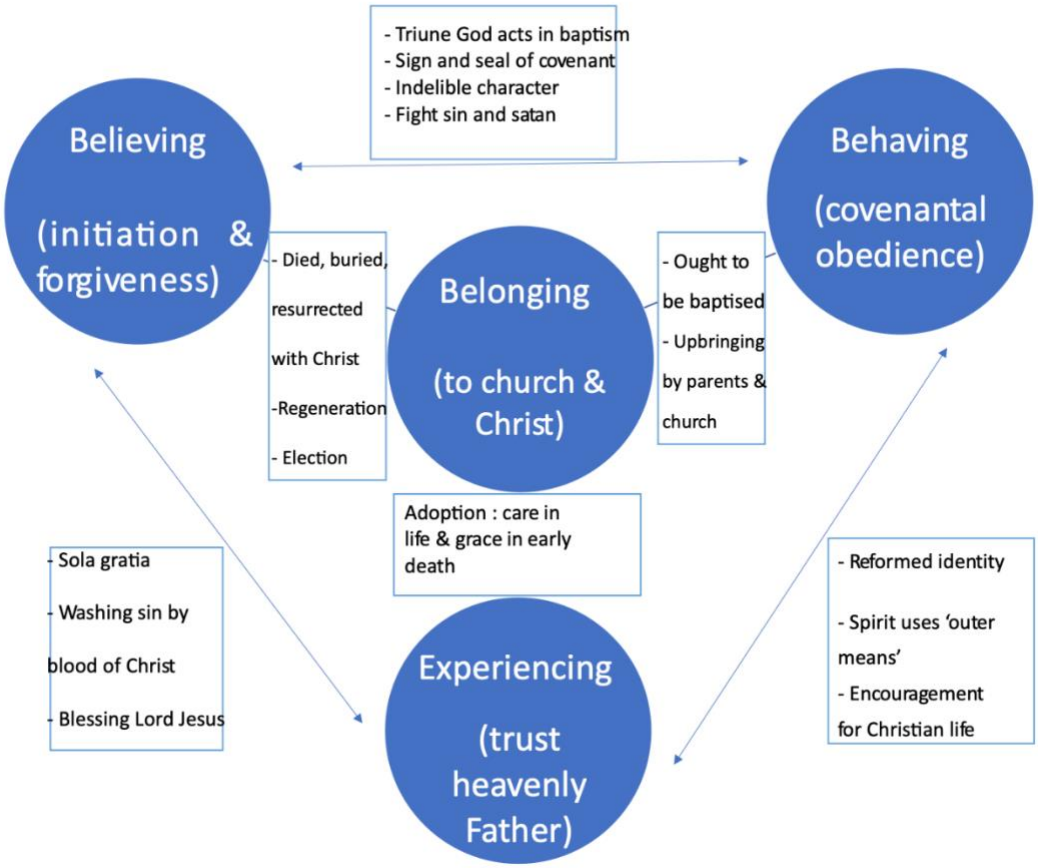

Figure 6 Baptismal Narrative Calvin in Geneva

6.9. Summarizing Reflections

In Calvin's context and sixteenth-century society, infant baptism was very common. Apart from a small 'sectarian' minority, all parents had their children baptized as soon as possible and, in case of an emergency, midwives or others could also perform the baptism. The parents, and especially the fathers, were typically absent at baptism and it was performed in a church or at home, but not in the context of a regular worship service (or mass). According to Calvin and other Reformed leaders, it had become a practice driven by fear of illness, evil powers and the devil. Infant baptism was accompanied by additional rituals of exorcism, without which the child would remain in the power of the devil. As with the other sacraments, baptism was believed to be instrumental in the salvation of the child.

Calvin continued the practice of infant baptism, which he believed to be a biblical institution practised from the Early Church on, but he appropriated it in fresh ways, in the framework of the sixteenth-century Reformation and in the Genevan context. Infant baptism was now related to the notion of initiation into the covenant and the church. Baptism was administered in a regular worship service and the presence of especially the father was required because he should take responsibility for the Christian and practical upbringing of the child. The rite of baptism itself was reduced to the reading of the form, prayer, questions to the parents and the actual baptism. The rituals associated with exorcism were rejected because the child of believing parents is already holy from the womb of

the mother. Emergency baptisms were rejected as unnecessary, because baptism is a means of grace, but not a means of salvation. The mode of baptism (sprinkling or immersion) was not relevant to Calvin, but baptism has an indelible character because of God's faithful promise and can, therefore, not be repeated. In short: Calvin's appropriation was a simplification of the rite of infant baptism, which now required the responsibility of the parents and the church for the spiritual upbringing of the child.

Secondly, infant baptism was also theologically resourced. In the Roman Catholic practice, infant baptism was seen as indispensable for salvation, a rite of exorcism, in which the parents were more or less absent. For Calvin it was a visible sign and seal of God's election and adoption, of God's gracious promise of forgiveness of sin, and engrafting in the death and resurrection of Christ. It was a means of assurance and grace for the child of the Covenant and the believing parents promised at baptism to take responsibility for the Christian upbringing of the child. The child is brought into the community of the church, which is the workplace of the Holy Spirit. Therefore the efficacy of infant baptism is not attributed to the water or the act of baptism, but to the work of the Holy Spirit, which becomes visible later when the child comes to faith.

Thirdly, infant baptism is a valid sacrament, not only because it is comparable to Old Testament circumcision, but also because many places in the New Testament (for example, Jesus' blessing of the children, the children are holy in the believing parent (1Cor. 7:14), the so-called house texts in Acts) show that God is faithful to the believers and their children to a thousand generations.

Throughout the centuries, the heritage of Calvin and other Reformed theologians remained part of the DNA of the Reformed family, and the theology and practice of infant baptism have been appropriated by Reformed believers over and again in various contexts. In this way, the family traits are present, but in relation to the various contexts, some elements were accentuated, while others were neglected. In the intercultural conversation (in the next chapter), Calvin's voice from the historical Genevan context is helpful for reflecting on the question of where the theology and practice of infant baptism in the Reformed family emerged from, where it stands today and how it could proceed from here on.

7. Intercultural Conversation on Infant Baptism

In this chapter the sub-questions three and four of this research will be answered, namely:
- *what are the similarities and differences in the Reformed appropriations of infant baptism in the researched contemporary contexts, against the background of the 16th and 17th-century Reformed tradition?*
- *what can be learned from the different appropriations for a Reformed theology of infant baptism?*

I wish to answer these questions by staging an intercultural theological conversation on the Reformed theology and practice of infant baptism, in which the similarities and differences between the research contexts will become clear. The purpose of this conversation is not only to understand the theological convictions of the other but also that we can, 'together with all the Lord's holy people', gain a deeper grasp of God's love in Christ (Eph. 3:18–19).[1] In an intercultural conversation, we acknowledge that Christian theology is, first of all, a faithful appropriation of the Gospel of Christ in and for a certain context. At the same time, because we make truth claims about God in theology, it is important to bring various local expressions into the conversation.[2] These could reveal new or neglected aspects of the Christian faith and practices. Such a conversation can also have a critical function, by making us aware of our cultural blinkers, reminding us that our appropriations of Christian teachings and practices are also contextually embedded, or that certain appropriations are not compatible with the canonical Scriptures or the Reformed confessions.
Finally, in § 7.7 and § 7.8, I would like to indicate what we can learn from the intercultural conversation for a Reformed theology of infant baptism: which questions and areas require further attention and what would be a possible way forward for ongoing appropriations of the Reformed theology and tradition of infant baptism?

7.1. Sensitizing Concepts

In preparation for the empirical research, I have formulated sensitizing concepts,[3] which operationalize the four aspects of the BBBE model of appropriation (believing, belonging, behaving and experiencing). These concepts were chosen based on a close reading of (a) the 'normative voices' of Reformed theology, i.e., Scripture references and the Reformed confessions[4] and (b) the 'formal voices' of the baptismal forms and Reformed theological publications. These sensitizing concepts guided the interviews, and also served as theological orientation points in the data analysis and the comparison between the research contexts.[5] They also underline the explorative character of this research: I, first of all, invited the respondents to talk about the aspects of infant baptism that are important and meaningful to them. I anticipated that the sensitizing concepts would be interpreted in different ways by respondents in the various contexts, that new concepts might surface, and that some of the concepts I use may be irrelevant to some or all respondents in the research contexts. This presumption was correct, as is visible from this overview:

[1] Walls, 'Ephesian Moment'; Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 419f; van den Toren, 'Three-Way Conversation', 129.
[2] van den Toren, *Apologetics*, 128; Cortez, 'Creation and Context', 13; Bom and van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity*, 165.
[3] See § 2.2.2 for a methodological explanation.
[4] Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards.
[5] See Chapter 2 for a methodological explanation of the use of sensitizing concepts and relevant literature.

		Relevant Sensitizing Concepts	Less Relevant Sensitizing Concepts	New Sensitizing Concepts
Believing		* Child of God (adoption) * (Original) sin * Cleansing (forgiveness)	* Rebirth / regeneration / Holy Spirit * Salvation	* Protection
Belonging		* covenant * Church * Christian family	* Engrafted in Christ (burial and resurrection)	* Non-Reformed relatives * Non-Reformed context * Christian identity
Behaving		* Baptismal instruction * Responsibility of parents & upbringing	* Baptism as an embodied rite	* Obedience to God * Mode of baptism
Experiencing		* Religious experience of believers		* Divine/spiritual presence/distance * Evil spiritual presence/distance (witches; demons)

Table 7 Overview Sensitizing Concepts

In short: the theological presumptions, as reflected in the initial sensitizing concepts, were 'tested', corrected and enhanced in the field research and then further explored and analysed in the intercultural conversation.[6]

7.2. Staging an Intercultural Conversation

In this chapter I am staging a multi-layered intercultural conversation:[7]

(a) A synchronic layer: the conversation among respondents from RPCI in North India, the CCAP Nkhoma in Central Malawi and the Dutch RCN;
(b) A diachronic layer: the conversation with the historical appropriation of infant baptism by Calvin in his Genevan context;
(c) A normative and ecclesiastical layer: shared attention to the voice of canonical Scriptures, the Reformed confessions, as well as to the baptismal forms currently used in the various contexts.

The conversation is informed by a shared belonging of all participants in the conversation to the worldwide Reformed family and a shared attention to God. The goal of the conversation is not to work towards a homogenised theology and practice of Reformed infant baptism, but to explore, how various appropriations in the unity and diversity of the Reformed family could function. Here I apply, in the context of intercultural theology, what Sundermeier calls '*convivencia*':[8] living together while being different, not in a superficial way, but with the intention of mutually listening to and learning from each other.

The conversation is staged and orchestrated by the researcher.[9] In the conversations I adopt two different roles:

[6] Denzin and Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 512.
[7] See § 2.4 for a methodological explanation.
[8] Theo Sundermeier, 'Aspects of Interreligious Hermeneutics', in *Towards an Intercultural Theology: Essays in Honour of Jan A.B. Jongeneel*, eds Martha Frederiks, Meindert Dijkstra, and Anton Houtepen, IIMO Research Publication 61 (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003), 74. See § 2.1.1.
[9] Van den Toren, 'Three-Way Conversation', 125.

a. Moderator — a technical function, which role I fulfil, firstly, by describing the common ground and deciding, based on the data from the field research, which topics will be discussed. Secondly, I establish the connections between the conversation partners by relating the voices from the research contexts to the historical voice of Calvin, the baptismal forms, and the Reformed confessions.
b. Conversation partner — this position comes into play in the personal reflections below. Under this heading I am joining the conversation as a Western Reformed theologian by pointing out possibilities of mutual learning, reflecting on the conversation from a theological point of view and relating the conversation to the broader discourse on the sacraments and infant baptism. If relevant, I am also asking what the conversation means for the fabric of the Reformed theology and practice of infant baptism, as well as what the implications of the outcome from the conversation could be for the future of the theology and practice of infant baptism.

7.3. Appropriating Infant Baptism: Believing

In the context of this research, I understand 'believing', first of all, as believing in a person or an idea and a personal commitment to that belief.[10] This fits in with the Reformational conviction that believing is not just intellectual, but a cluster of knowing, affirming and trusting.[11]

7.3.1. Sensitizing Concepts

For the 'believing' aspect of the appropriation of infant baptism, I use the following sensitizing concepts: (1) child of God, (2) (original) sin, (3) cleansing, (4) rebirth, regeneration and the Holy Spirit, (5) salvation.
The sensitizing concepts were only partly relevant to the respondents and were appropriated in different ways. To name some examples, pastors and theologians in all contexts agreed that all children are 'born sinners', while many parents expressed their doubts or made their own appropriations of this concept. The concept of cleansing, which is prominent in Reformed confessions and baptismal forms, played a secondary or marginal role for most ordinary believers and the idea of rebirth or regeneration through the Holy Spirit at baptism hardly surfaced at all during the interviews.
During the interviews, new aspects were observed, too, of which protection turned out to be relevant in all three research contexts. The problems and dangers encountered by Christians are different in each context, but there was a common understanding among the ordinary believers that infant baptism assures us of God's protection.[12]

7.3.2. Common Ground

In the research contexts, we noticed a common ground with respect to the beliefs about infant baptism, on which most of the pastors and ordinary believers agreed. Baptism is instituted by Jesus Christ (Mat. 28:19) and, according to a Reformed understanding, should also be given to little children, because Jesus blessed the children. There is also a common understanding that children are a gift from God and that infant baptism signifies that the children of believers are God's children and sanctified in the faith of the parents (1Cor. 7:14). According to the pastors and most of the ordinary believers, infant baptism is not to be identified with salvation, because not the rite of baptism, but only God saves. There is also no practice of emergency baptism because it is believed

[10] See § 2.2.1.1 for a methodological explanation.
[11] I am aware of the intellectualistic tendency, which was present in the later Reformed tradition and also in the RCN, but I contend that this was not the intent of Reformers such as Calvin. See, for example, W. van 't Spijker, 'Doctrina naar Reformatorische opvatting I', *Theologia Reformata* 20, no. 4 (1977): 17–34; W. van 't Spijker, 'Doctrina naar Reformatorische opvatting II', *Theologia Reformata* 21, no. 1 (1978): 9–27; Trimp, *Klank en weerklank*.
[12] See below § 7.3.3.3.

that even when little children of believers die unbaptized, they are saved by God's grace. At the same time: in all three research contexts, some parents felt insecure about this. The ordinary believers, in particular, expressed that infant baptism signifies God's care for their children and that God protects their children in a dangerous world, even though the character of this protection is strongly coloured by the context.

7.3.3. Intercultural Conversations on Believing

We now turn our attention to those sensitizing concepts that turned out to be the most important for the respondents: (1) child of God, (2) baptismal protection and (3) original sin and cleansing. I listen to the voices from the research contexts, the historical formal voice of Calvin, the Reformed confessions and the baptismal forms. I bring these into a conversation and I conclude this section with some personal reflections.

7.3.3.1. Children of God

When I began the field research, I presupposed that Reformed believers would agree that children of believers are children of God and that this relationship between God and his children is at stake in infant baptism. This was confirmed, in general, but in the various contexts there were different perspectives on who God is, which also shapes and affects the relationship between God and his children.

Believers in the RPCI in North India believe that God is highly exalted and deserves reverence and awe. As a consequence, they do not address God as Father but as Lord or God. This is, first of all, out of reverence for an almighty God, because believers can also speak about God as a loving Father — He is surely not a high or distant God. Instead, there were testimonies of power encounters, which showed that the Christian God can save and heal, where Hindu rituals fail.[13] For many RPCI believers, it is exactly the personal relationship with the one Christian God that is more attractive than Hinduism with its millions of deities.[14]

For Malawian CCAP Nkhoma members, the Christian God is primarily a high God, although different from the Supreme Being of ATR, as God can be prayed to directly, without the intervention of ancestors or spirits. Here too, God is not addressed as Father, but as Lord ('*Mulungu*'). This also seems to characterise the relationship between God and the believers: pastors and teachers sometimes speak about the love of God, but ordinary believers did not use expressions such as 'the love of God' or 'a loving God'.[15] They stress the need for obedience to God and 'doing the right thing'. In sermons, the village elders, in particular, tend to be legalistic. There are also voices of young pastors who criticize this approach and stress God's love and grace, hoping to reinforce faith in God's power over all areas of life.[16]

For CCAP Nkhoma believers, the relationship with God is, viewed from a Western perspective, often experienced as pragmatic: if we do what God commands, He will keep us safe. This is also how many CCAP Nkhoma believers perceive infant baptism: God told us to baptize the children and if we are obedient, God will protect the child.[17] In this sense, the Christian God sometimes bears the traits of the distant Supreme Being of ATR. The lack of an intimate relationship with God results in parents, in a crisis, doubting the power of infant baptism and resorting to ATR practices after all.

The fear of CCAP Nkhoma believers that the Christian God is not able to protect sufficiently seems to be absent among members of the North Indian RPCI, who trust in God's active help in power

[13] E-22:2.6; father; 20+.

[14] See § 3.7.3.1.

[15] See § 4.5.1.1.

[16] In a critical evaluation of the practice of the Lord's Supper a young pastor writes: 'At Holy Communion services, preachers usually intimidate and scare the congregants with sermons without God's love and mercy'. (D-37:5)

[17] See § 4.5.1.1.

encounters, healings or miracles, in which the 'Christian God' turns out to be more powerful than the Hindu deities or hostile Hindu relatives.[18] However, there are also CCAP Nkhoma parents who testify of God's powerful activity at infant baptism, and of the assurance of God's protection against evil powers.[19] One mother stated: '*I believe when they're being baptized, God is there and the Holy Spirit is there witnessing. So they also have their names written in the Book of Life.'* (E-60:1; mother; 20+)

In the Dutch RCN, we see a different picture: the relationship between God and his children is, first of all, characterized by love and care, whereas the idea of 'duty and obedience', which is characteristic of CCAP Nkhoma and also present in the RPCI, is found but sporadically among the interviewed members of the RCN. For most RCN respondents, infant baptism is a deliberate choice by the parents.[20] RCN respondents would be astonished to hear about the hesitation of RPCI and CCAP Nkhoma believers to address God as 'Father', or about the idea of a 'high God' among CCAP members. Rather, they stress God's nearness, love and grace, and in their prayers, they speak intimately and often in a 'conversational way' with their heavenly Father. They share their concerns with God and trust His unconditional love and readiness to forgive their sins. To RCN parents, God is often more a close 'Friend' than a mighty King.[21]

For RCN parents, infant baptism demonstrates, first of all, that life is good with God as Father: He is the good Creator, who gives new and precious life. Children are safe under God's wing and God is a good Father who comforts, helps and understands us in all circumstances. God's loving kindness for the children of the covenant is hardly ever doubted and infant baptism signifies this love.[22]

Next, we listen to the historical formal voice of Calvin. To him, addressing God as Father is important and indicates that the believer is a child of God. To address God as Father is possible because of the work of Christ.[23] According to Calvin, the name Father has a 'great sweetness' and a 'feeling of love' that 'frees us from all distrust'.[24] God is the Almighty One, but He is also a benevolent 'Father of a family', 'our merciful Father, wishing to receive us into grace in accordance with his incomparable kindness', who shows 'infinite goodness' and 'boundless generosity'.[25] Calvin is also cautious: 'although prayer is an intimate conversation of the pious with God, yet reverence and moderation must be kept'.[26]

The 'normative voice' of the Reformed confessions shows much agreement with Calvin's position. The Belgic Confession speaks about 'our gracious heavenly Father, who watches over us with fatherly care'. And: 'Baptism also witnesses to us that God, being our gracious Father, will be our God forever'.[27] The Heidelberg Catechism calls God a faithful Father[28] and trusts that God our Father 'will not refuse to give us what we ask in faith'.[29] The same is true for the Westminster Standards.[30]

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[18] See § 3.7.3.1.
[19] See § 4.5.2.1.
[20] See § 5.5.5.2.
[21] See § 5.5.1.1.
[22] See § 5.5.2.2.
[23] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 1559 ed. (Philadelphia; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), III.20.36. See Elsie Anne McKee, 'John Calvin's Teaching on the Lord's Prayer', *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, no. Supplementary Issue nr. 2 (1992): 96. See also: Commentary Mt. 3:17, A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke.
[24] Calvin, *Inst.* III.20.21 / III.20.36.
[25] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.7. See also Calvin, *Inst.* IV.1.10 / IV.16.7 / IV.16.9 / IV.16.13 and IV.16.32. See above § 6.xx.
[26] Calvin, *Inst.* III.20.16. See also: Ibid., chap. I.2.2.
[27] BC art. 13 and 34.
[28] HC QA 26 and 28.
[29] HC QA 120.
[30] WCF art. 12; WSC QA 100; WLC QA 189.

7.3.3.2. Personal Reflections

In conclusion, we can say that Calvin and the Reformed confessions testify to a more intimate relationship with God than we observe in the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma and, to a lesser extent, in the North Indian RPCI. Yet we also find in Calvin and the confessions a reverence towards the almighty God, such as is also observed in the RPCI. On the other hand, the Dutch RCN respondents stress God's love and nearness in all situations, an aspect that fits the desire for authenticity and experience in the Dutch postmodern context, but which can also serve as a corrective notion for Reformed believers in the CCAP Nkhoma, as to relating to God more intimately.
In shared attention to God as a Father for his children, a continued intercultural conversation could enrich the various appropriations of being a child of God and might help to obtain a proper balance between confidence in God's 'Fatherly goodness' and 'reverence'.[31]

7.3.3.3. Baptismal Protection

As indicated above (§ 7.3.2), in the research contexts trained theologians and ordinary believers alike express that the baptismal water or the ritual of infant baptism does not offer salvation. However, in all three research contexts, parents relate infant baptism in some way to the protection of their child, even though the local concerns are different. This was not anticipated by the researcher and it was not mentioned by the local pastors or theologians either[32], but it proved to be important for a number of the ordinary believers.
In the North Indian RPCI, parents expect that baptism will protect their children from all kinds of evil and sickness, as well as from the influence of 'evil people'.[33] They also understand infant baptism to be a sign and seal of the faithfulness and power of God in safeguarding their children as God's children in a threatening Hindu environment. In this way, God's baptismal promise receives local colour: parents trust that when they 'claim' their child for the one true God through infant baptism, God is a powerful and trustworthy heavenly Father in protecting the children against satanic attacks and Hindu attraction.[34] One mother explains: '*After baptizing, I received that peace: now God has also chosen my son… Now, wherever he'll go God will always be with him and protect him.*'[35] In this way, infant baptism empowers Reformed believers in a minority position to bring up their children as God's children. This also illustrates the deep socio-religious rift between the dominant Hindu environment and Reformed Christianity in North India.[36]
The early Reformed missionaries to Central Malawi noticed that new Christian believers continued to be attracted to ATR and still expected protection from the ATR spirit world. The missionaries rejected the ATR practices and its worldview as superstitious but did not offer a theological alternative for the desired protection.[37] It is interesting that today at least part of the CCAP Nkhoma parents inform us that, in infant baptism, they dedicate the child to God and they trust that God offers lasting protection to the child from evil forces, witchcraft and from all kinds of moral

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[31] WLC QA 189.
[32] One RCN pastor spoke in a general way of 'protection' in the sense that 'God always cares' (F-178:16; pastor; 30+).
[33] See § 3.8.4.
[34] See § 3.7.1.3, § 3.7.3.2 and § 3.7.7.1.
[35] E-31:9; mother 20+.
[36] I cannot here address questions related to the 'insider movement', or how the Jesu Bhakta and similar Christ followers try to follow Jesus while staying in the Hindu fold. See, e.g. Ciril J. Kuttiyanikkal, *Khrist Bhakta Movement: A Model for an Indian Church? Inculturation in the Area of Community Building* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2014); Natun Bhattacharya, 'Exploring Hindu "Insider Movements": Syncretism or Authentic Contextualization? A Theological and Missiological Appraisal with a Fresh Approach', in *Majority World Theologies: Theologizing from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Ends of the Earth*, eds Allen Yeh and Tite Tiénou (Littleton: William Carey Library Pub, 2018).
[37] See § 4.5.2.2.

temptations.[38] In the battle with evil forces, parents make a covenant with the Christian 'high God', the children are brought from the darkness of evil influences into the light of God's protection and the blood of Jesus protects the children.[39] One mother states: '*Infant baptism is getting a child into the hands of God. He will now be in the hands of God until he grows up, like his parents. (…) God protects the child in several areas. Number one from people with bad intent on the child and God also protects the child from witchcraft, and God, on the positive note, will also give wisdom to the child, that he can do other things according to God's will.*' (E-62:2; mother 20+). In this way, infant baptism receives a fresh appropriation for CCAP Nkhoma believers today, even though a number of parents also participate in protective ATR rituals, because they are not convinced that God is sufficiently powerful or that infant baptism offers enough protection. In that sense, there is more hybridity among the CCAP Nkhoma respondents than among the North Indian believers.[40]

In the Dutch RCN, ordinary believers relate infant baptism to the unconditional acceptance of their children by a loving Father. Parents often experience the secular world as threatening and in a postmodern and post-Christian society they find it hard to see and experience God's presence in daily life. However, infant baptism assures them that God is always there as the heavenly Father, who will help the parents in the upbringing of the children. Even if a child strays away from God, it can always return.[41]

The differences between the porous worldview of the RPCI and CCAP Nkhoma believers and the secular Dutch context of the RCN believers become visible in what they expect from God's protection: RCN parents are not worried about witches or demons; in the Dutch welfare state with a low infant mortality rate and religious tolerance, the fear of illness or persecution is much less present than in the Indian RPCI and the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma. RCN parents, however, express fear of their children being enticed by the secular world, materialism and (postmodern) relativism but also believe that God's promise of care and His divine presence at infant baptism is important.[42]

Listening to the historical formal voice of Calvin, we realise, that the 16th century is sometimes called 'the devil's golden age'[43] because the fear of demons and evil forces was a daily reality.[44] Witch hunts took place in all parts of Europe[45] and even well-educated people were afraid of witchcraft.[46] This widespread popular piety triggered the development of infant baptism into a rite of exorcism in the Middle Ages.[47] Calvin also saw Satan and demons as real evil spiritual beings, plotting against God and his children and having great power to deceive and betray people. In that sense, Calvin's appropriation in his context can also help to reflect on the appropriation in the CCAP in Central Malawi and the RPCI in North India today.

Still, and perhaps different from what ordinary people in sixteenth-century Geneva believed, Calvin would not consider infant baptism a means of protection against witches and evil powers, or protection from all kinds of evil and non-Christian influences. The main reason for this being that he believed that Christ already casted out demons and conquered Satan at the cross. Satan is powerful,

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[38] See § 4.5.3 and § 4.5.4.

[39] See § 4.5.9.1.

[40] See § 4.5.2.2 and § 4.5.9.1.

[41] See § 5.5.1.1, § 5.5.4.1 and § 5.5.9.5.

[42] See § 5.5.1.1 and § 5.5.2.2.

[43] Charles A.M. Hall, *With the Spirit's Sword. The Drama of Spiritual Warfare in the Theology of John Calvin* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1968), 55.

[44] Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling*, 215.

[45] Brian P. Levack, 'The Great Witch-Hunt', in *Handbook of European History 1400-1600: Late Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation*, eds Thomas Brady, Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy, Volume II: Visions, Programs, Outcomes (Leiden; New York; Köln: Brill, 1995), 607–40.

[46] E. William Monter, 'Witchcraft in Geneva, 1537-1662', *The Journal of Modern History* 43, no. 2 (1971): 180–204. Levack, 'The Great Witch-Hunt', 628; Bengt Ankarloo, Stuart Clark, and E. William Monter, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, vol. 4, Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe (London: Athlone, 2002), 20.

[47] See § 6.3.1 and § 6.6.1.

but he is on God's leash and cannot do anything without God's permission; at times even being used by God as the fulfilment of His judgment.[48] Demons and witches have no power over the children of believers, neither before nor after infant baptism.[49] For that reason, the Reformed re-formation of the Medieval practice of infant baptism eradicated the practice of exorcism from infant baptism.
It is also important to note that Calvin refers to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, which is not just a protection, but includes our human activity and responsibility: God will '*assist us by his Holy Spirit, in order that we may be able to war against the devil, sin, and the lusts of our flesh, and gain the victory over them*'.[50] Finally, Calvin speaks about the protection of baptism but he does so in the theological context of protection from God's wrath, the forgiveness of sin and adoption. By referring to the images of the passing through the Red Sea and the protecting cloud in the desert, Calvin understands baptism on the one hand as being embraced by the water as a sign of being buried and resurrected with Christ. But these images also create room for understanding baptism as protection against threats in daily life, even though God's assurance of eternal salvation is the most important.[51] It is also important to notice that for Calvin infant baptism functions as a means of grace, even though its effect is delayed: when a child grows up, the reflection on 'being baptized' stimulates the response of faith.[52]
The Belgic Confession says about baptism that the cleansing from sin '*does not happen by the physical water but by the sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God, who is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, who is the devil, and to enter the spiritual land of Canaan*'.[53] This last citation refers to Ex. 14:21 and 1Cor. 10:2 and does not resonate with many secular believers in the Netherlands, while it makes sense for CCAP Nkhoma parents, who baptize their children to protect them from the power of Satan and evil forces, as well as for RPCI parents, who see infant baptism as protection against Hindu influences and a claiming of the child for the Christian God.

7.3.3.4. Personal Reflections

We can conclude that, in all three contexts, the aspect of protection emerges as an appropriation of infant baptism, while the actual form of protection is shaped by the context. The non-Western worldview (porous self) seems closer to the context of the normative voice of Reformed theology than the Western secular worldview (buffered self). In the interviews with RCN respondents, the devil was not mentioned, although the baptismal forms contain the prayer: '*may he (she) live in all righteousness under our only Teacher, King, and High Priest, Jesus Christ, and valiantly fight against and overcome sin, the devil, and his whole dominion*'.[54] In shared attention to God from the various contexts, it is possible that listening to CCAP Nkhoma and RPCI espoused theological voices could deepen the baptismal theology of the RCN parents and stimulate them to see infant baptism as one of the God-given means of grace in a spiritual battle. The RPCI and CCAP Nkhoma believers might, in turn, be stimulated to consider the problems connected with a worldview, where the world is divided into the realm of God on the one hand and the powers and spirits of Satan and demons on the other hand.[55]

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[48] Calvin, *Inst.* I.18.2; II.4.2; C. F. C. Coetzee, 'Calvyn oor die verskynsel van demonologie', *Acta Theologica* 28, no. 2 (2008): 25–40. See also: Hall, *With the Spirit's Sword*, 54–77.
[49] 'Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.22. See also: Calvin, *Tracts, Vol. 3*, 3:109f; 275.
[50] Calvin, 'Form Baptism', 114–15.
[51] Wolf, *Einheit*, 92.
[52] Bierma, *Font of Pardon and New Life*, 165–66.
[53] BC art. 34.
[54] Canadian Reformed Churches, *Book of Praise*, 587.
[55] Cf. Henning Wrogemann, 'Demons and Deliverance as a Challenge to Intercultural Theology', in *Witchcraft, Demons and Deliverance*, eds Claudia Währisch-Oblau and Henning Wrogemann (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2015), 167–83.

The stress on divine protection in and through infant baptism in India[56] and Malawi[57] made me aware that this element is more present in the Dutch theological context than I had realized, although here it takes on the form of God's care and actual presence in a secularizing context.[58] The words of the classical Reformed form of infant baptism gain fresh meaning: '*[God the Father] adopts us for His children and heirs, and promises to provide us with all good and avert all evil or turn it to our benefit.*'[59] In addition to this, the shared belief of respondents that infant baptism does not imply that a child is eternally saved needs, at least, to be qualified. For a number of ordinary believers, infant baptism protects against demonic or satanic power and witchcraft and attacks of evil people. Is it possible that trained theologians in the various contexts relativize or minimalize the effectiveness of infant baptism because they are afraid of any 'magical' ideas in relation to the baptismal water? A renewed reading of Calvin's baptismal theology might perhaps stimulate them to re-appreciate the effectiveness of infant baptism in and for their context and bring them closer to the theological intuitions of their congregation members in this respect.

7.3.3.5. (Original) Sin and Cleansing

The concepts of original sin and cleansing were among the sensitizing concepts that I used from the outset. Also here, different understandings surfaced and also the difference between 'normative' Reformed theology and current formal and espoused theologies was significant.

In the North Indian RPCI, the concept of original sin is broadly accepted: pastors, teachers and many congregation members believe that children share in original sin and need forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ. However, pastors and teachers hesitate to speak too much about the relationship between infant baptism and the washing of sin. They want to safeguard a clear distance from Hindu water rituals, which are related to '*moksa*' (salvation). To avoid any magical syncretistic association, several pastors hesitate to speak about baptism as the washing of sin.[60] Many ordinary believers also underline that there is 'no power in the water'. A father says: *'according to our Indian culture, our Hindu friends think that any ritual or ceremony helps to get a free ticket to heaven or to enter into God's kingdom. But that's not our understanding. We don't get into God's kingdom through our rituals or the ceremonies.'* (E-21:18; father; 20+) Some parents even state that baptism does not refer to salvation at all, because only the blood of Jesus can save.[61]

The CCAP Nkhoma pastors and teachers all mention that little children are born sinners. Many ordinary believers agree with that, but they understand original sin mostly not as personal guilt or being sinful, but as 'being in the hands of the devil', victims of evil forces. Humans are seen as a battleground between God and evil powers.[62] The pastors and teachers speak about infant baptism as a cleansing of sin, but parents mention foremost that in infant baptism children are dedicated to God so that He might protect them. When parents speak about forgiveness, they do not relate this to the water of baptism but to the act of dedicating their child to God in baptism.[63]

The RCN pastors and many ordinary believers agree that children are born sinners, yet there is also much hesitation. The interviewed pastors and elders indicate that for many congregation members this is questionable and in a number of RCN churches the baptismal question about children as born sinners is softened.[64] In the interviews, many Dutch ordinary believers refrain from speaking about a child as being guilty before God, but they see that children are in a perilous condition, which makes

[56] See § 3.7.1.4.
[57] See § 4.5.1.3.
[58] See § 5.5.1.1 and § 5.5.4.1.
[59] Canadian Reformed Churches, *Book of Praise*, 584.
[60] This was also later confirmed by an Indian gatekeeper: D-200; gatekeeper NI3.
[61] See § 3.7.1.2 and § 3.7.2.
[62] See § 4.5.9.1.
[63] See § 4.5.1.3 and § 4.5.9.1, § 4.5.9.4.
[64] See § 5.5.1.2.

it inevitable that children will become sinners when they grow up. Sin is not so much 'original sin', in which the child unknowingly participates, but contamination from outside. In this way, infant baptism points first of all to future forgiveness, which God is always willing to grant.
A father says: *'Yes, all people consciously commit sin (…) I don't think a child does that.'*
Interviewer: Okay, so you mean that in that sense he does not need forgiveness?
Father: (…) No, if he didn't sin consciously, he needs no forgiveness'.[65]
Most Dutch ordinary believers agree that, for little children too, fellowship with God as Father is possible only through Christ, but the core idea of infant baptism is for them not the cleansing from sin but the thankfulness of the parents for the birth of the baby, who is 'a pearl in God's hand'.[66]
Calvin's historical voice shows a clear parallel between baptismal washing and washing with the blood of Christ.[67] For him, the baptismal water symbolizes the blood of Christ. However, it is not just a sign of washing of sin, but also a 'protecting veil' against God's divine judgement. He refers to the blood of the Passover, and to the protection of God's people by the 'cloud' in the desert at the time of the Exodus: '*For as the Lord covered them with a cloud and gave them coolness, that they might not weaken and pine away in the merciless heat of the sun, so do we recognize that in baptism we are covered and protected by Christ's blood, that God's severity, which is truly an unbearable flame, should not assail us*'.[68] Baptism does not take away original sin, but the believers and their children are freed from the curse of Adam and protected against the wrath of God because of sin.[69]
The idea of protection from God's judgment is also expressed in the RCN baptismal forms, in the so-called 'Flood prayer'. It is recalled that, in Noah's time, Pharaoh and his soldiers drowned in the water of God's judgment, while God's people were protected 'in and through the water', which 'signifies baptism'.[70] Such references are not found in the Heidelberg Catechism, nor in the Westminster Standards, but the recent Dutch Reformed 'ordinary catechism' describes how in baptism our old life is judged by God and buried with Christ.[71] Interestingly, in none of the research contexts did respondents mention protection against God's judgement as a meaningful aspect of infant baptism.

7.3.3.6. Personal Reflections

The sinful condition of little children is the cornerstone in the normative Reformed theology of infant baptism, which is reflected in the baptismal forms and teaching of the pastors. However, the doctrine that baptism is a sign of a gracious and undeserved adoption of 'unnatural' children, who are 'born sinners' does not resonate with many ordinary believers.[72] For them, infant baptism is often not a sign and seal of rebirth or renewal through the Holy Spirit,[73] or unity with Christ,[74] or a

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[65] Respondent: 'Mensen zijn, ja elk mens is bewust zondig. Ik denk niet dat een kind dat doet.'
Interviewer: 'Oké. Dus in die zin heeft hij geen vergeving nodig, bedoel je?'
Respondent: 'Nee. Nee, als hij geen bewuste zonde maakt heeft hij geen vergeving nodig.'(E-163:17; FATHER; 30+)
[66] See § 5.5.2.1; § 5.5.2.3; § 5.5.9.2.
[67] Calvin, 'Form Baptism', 115. / 1541: Calvin, 'Catechism', 85. / Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.2 / 10; IV.16.2-4.22. See also: Old, *Shaping of Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 278f.
[68] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.9.
[69] Ibid., IV.16.31-32. See also: Calvin, 'Form Baptism', 116.
[70] 'Thou hast drowned the obstinate Pharaoh and all his host in the Red Sea, but led Thy people Israel through the midst of the sea on dry ground – by which baptism was signified.' Canadian Reformed Churches, *Book of Praise*, 586. The baptismal forms do not mention the aspect of divine judgment (2nd form) or leave it open (1st and 3rd form) by formulating that in God's 'saving actions we see already something from baptism'.
[71] Pleizier, Huijgen, and te Velde, *Gewone Catechismus*, 28–30. References are made to 1 Pet. 3 and Rom. 6.
[72] The classical baptismal form, as well as the current Dutch baptismal forms, refer for 'adoption' to Gen. 17:7, Rom. 8, 15-17, Eph. 1:4-5.
[73] Classical references are: John 3:5 and Titus 3:5.
[74] Classical references: Romans 6:1-11; Gal. 3:27.

transition to new life in Christ[75]. As a consequence, ordinary believers in the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma and the Dutch RCN often have difficulty relating the baptismal water to the washing of sin or even attributing meaning to the baptismal water in general.[76] In the North Indian RPCI context, some respondents have no problems with the teaching of original sin, but because they fear the possibility of any magic power being attributed to the baptismal water, they subsequently find it difficult to speak about baptism as the washing of sin at all.[77]
The lack of clarity about the relation between the baptismal water and forgiveness or salvation may be partly due to the influence of criticism from Evangelical-Pentecostal Christians or non-believers and partly to the contexts. However, the fact that the same type of questions emerges in three very different contexts shows that, for the future of the Reformed practice of infant baptism, the doctrine of original sin and its relationship to infant baptism should be re-addressed.
Furthermore, the voices of normative (and formal) theology differ significantly from the espoused voices of theology, which raises the question of whether, and how, the current appropriations by ordinary believers and the normative and formal voices of Reformed theology could be brought into a fruitful conversation about meaningful local appropriations of the meaning of original sin, being saved from God's judgment and the relation to the water of baptism.

7.4. Appropriating Infant Baptism: Belonging

The second aspect of appropriation which I discern is 'belonging', which points to the relation of the believing parents and their children with God, to the relation of parents and children, but also to the relation to a (local) Christian church, the covenant and Christianity and the wider community or society.

7.4.1. Sensitizing Concepts

At the outset of this research, I formulated four sensitizing concepts for the aspect of 'belonging':[78] (a) engrafted in Christ (death and resurrection); (b) belonging to the covenant; (c) belonging to the church; (d) belonging to the Christian family.
In the interviews, the aspect of union with Christ, or being engrafted in Christ's death and resurrection, appeared to hardly play a role. However, three other concepts surfaced:
- The non-Christian environment (Hindu; ATR and secularity) affects the belonging aspect more than I had expected;
- Interaction with non-Reformed Christians clearly influences the perception of infant baptism;
- Infant baptism as a religious boundary marker is important in normative Reformed theology but is perceived very differently in the various research contexts.

7.4.2. Common Ground

In the research contexts, we noticed a common ground with respect to the aspect of belonging. Firstly, most respondents relate infant baptism foremost to the relationship between God and the child, followed by the relation between the child and the family or the church.[79] Secondly, the covenant with Abraham is the starting point for the understanding of infant baptism and this covenant is believed to have been continued in the New Testament. Nearly all respondents in the Indian RPCI and the Dutch RCN see a basic equivalence between circumcision and infant baptism as signs of the covenant. In the Central Malawian CCAP Nkhoma, this was true for the pastors, but most

[75] Classical references: Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12-14.
[76] See for the CCAP Nkhoma § 4.5.1.2 and § 4.5.9.1 and for the Dutch RCN § 5.5.1.3.
[77] See § 3.7.1.2.
[78] See BC art. 34 and HC QA 74.
[79] See for the North Indian RPCI § 3.7.3.1 and § 3.7.4; see for Central Malawian CCAP Nkhoma § 4.5.3.1; see for the Dutch RCN § 5.5.3.1.

ordinary believers referred only to the story of Jesus who blessed the children.[80] Thirdly, the importance of the church as a Christian family and a caring community, which supports the parents in the upbringing of the children in the faith, is mentioned in the three research contexts, even though the relationship with infant baptism is not always clear. All these elements are also found in Calvin's Genevan appropriation, the Reformed confessions and the current baptismal forms. Several Dutch gatekeepers were impressed by the way in which the community of the church takes shape in the RPCI and the CCAP Nkhoma and indicated that in the individualistic Dutch society this is often problematic.[81]

7.4.3. Intercultural Conversations on Belonging

In this section, I would like to pay attention to the various ways of belonging, which are related to the rite of infant baptism. I listen to the espoused voices in the research contexts, the formal voices of Calvin, the baptismal forms and the pastors and teachers, and to the normative voice of the Reformed confessions.

7.4.3.1. Belonging to the covenant

The covenant was one of my initial sensitizing concepts and is regularly mentioned in the research contexts, but there are clearly differences in the meaning attributed to it.

In the North Indian RPCI, part of the respondents believes that the initiative for making the covenant with the believing parents and their children is taken by God, because of divine election. A mother says that, after baptising her child, she received peace *'thinking that now God has also chosen his… my son. And now wherever he'll go God will always be with him and protect him'* (E-31:9; mother; 20+). This election can function as an empowerment for low-class people: it is a privilege to belong to the covenant of the Almighty God and to be part of the church. The children are special because they are 'saved sinners'.

For other RPCI parents, baptism seems to be more similar to child dedication, with the main stress on the human promise to bring up the child in the faith.[82] The reasons for this emphasis on human choice are partly to be found in the fear of any magical or divine force being attributed to the baptismal rite, as if it would work automatically, as in Hinduism. However, this emphasis is also stimulated by the influence of the Evangelical-Pentecostal movement, in which (adult) baptism points to human choice instead of to divine election.

In the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma, most ordinary believers state, firstly, that in baptism they take the initiative to make a covenant with God as a means to influence God: the parents do their part (dedicate their child to God) and now they trust that God will do His part. A teacher characterizes how ordinary believers see this: '*Because of the covenant relationship, God is there to provide the needs in the life of the child. (…) We make a covenant with God - we do our part and God will do his part*.' (F-48:8.14; teacher; 40+). It seems that infant baptism functions in a comparable way to the ATR notion: raising a child is a 'project', in which the child gradually 'becomes human'; infant baptism puts a child on the right track and opens it up for teaching, keeping it away from bad things that would harm the family or community. In this way, the biblical concept of the covenant is appropriated by using elements from the ATR worldview. Especially the idea that safeguarding the community is a common responsibility and that we can exist only together with others ('*umunthu*') plays a role.[83]

A number of Dutch RCN ordinary believers mention God's covenant and they believe that God is the initiator of the covenant and they refer to God's election. Other respondents prioritize the importance of the public testimony of the parents and their personal promise to God in the

[80] See for the North Indian RPCI § 3.7.11 and for the Dutch RCN § 5.5.3.1. See for CCAP Nkhoma § 4.5.
[81] D-201 / D-202.
[82] See § 3.7.5.4 and § 3.8.3.
[83] See § 4.5.4.

baptismal rite. Some parents publicly promise their children to take care of it. They also speak about dedicating their child to God. The aspect of 'taking responsibility' and the two-sidedness of the covenant is deeply ingrained in the RCN theology, but it seems that for many respondents today the promise and responsibility of the parents is the most important element.[84] One father says: *'You are standing there as proud parents. Also glad that you can make that conscious choice (…) that you want to raise your children in a certain way, in our way'*.[85]
In Calvin's theology, the covenant of grace is initiated by God, and its foundation is in the blood and sacrifice of Christ.[86] The parents belong to the covenant and therefore also their children are heirs of the covenant and that is why they ought to be baptized.[87] The child is initiated into the covenant and the Christian church.
The Reformed confessions and the various baptismal forms in the research contexts follow this line and stress the fact that the covenant is given by God and the children belong to it by God's grace in Christ. Infant baptism is the visible sign and seal of belonging to the covenant and the community of the church.[88]

7.4.3.2. Personal Reflections

The doctrine of the covenant is important in the normative and formal voices of Reformed theology in the various contexts. It is also present in the espoused voices of theology, but the concept of the covenant is appropriated in different ways.
Firstly, the Biblical accounts of the making of the covenant (Gen. 15 and 17), as well as the Reformed confessions and baptismal forms, stress God's initiative and sovereignty in establishing the covenant, as well as the human responsibility to live in the covenant. Ordinary believers in the CCAP could gain from listening to the voices of North Indian and Dutch Reformed believers, to hear how they consider the covenant not to be just an 'instrument', initiated by believers to receive protection, but a sign of God's prevenient grace, which invites believers to entrust themselves and their children to God's grace, love and care. Ordinary believers from the Dutch RCN could be enriched by listening to the Indian RPCI for a God-centred understanding of infant baptism, in which God's election creates space for living in his covenantal presence, even before we are aware of it.
Secondly, we noticed differences in the relationships of the individual with the community. In the Reformed confessions, infant baptism also signifies that children of the covenant are incorporated into Christ and into the community of the church. Many interviewed Dutch RCN parents have an individualized understanding of the covenant, as made first of all between God and the child.[89] In the North Indian RPCI there is more attention on infant baptism as the incorporation into the covenantal community, which is clearly to be discerned from the Hindu context.[90] In the CCAP Nkhoma, infant baptism as a sign of the covenant is often related to belonging to God and the broader Christian family and 'Christian *umunthu*' in the community.[91] For Dutch Reformed believers, the communal aspects in North India and Central Malawi could contribute to a more congregational and communal understanding of infant baptism as a sign and seal of belonging to God's people. The question remains whether '*umunthu*' can indeed be transformed in such a way that the basic

[84] See § 5.5.3.1 and § 5.5.4.
[85] '..als trotse ouders sta je er. (Trots) maar ook blij dat je ook gewoon bewust die keus kunt maken eigenlijk. (…) Van ja, wij willen, wij willen het kind op een bepaalde manier, op onze manier opvoeden.' (E-160:16; father; 30+)
[86] Wolf, *Einheit*, 99.
[87] See for a description of Calvin's understanding of the covenant in relation to infant baptism: see § 6.5.2 and § 6.5.4.
[88] BC art. 34; HC QA 74; WCF art. 28; CCAP Nkhoma Church Liturgy, ch. 18; AsianCat. QA 148; RPCI Form for the Baptism of Infants of Believers (concept).
[89] See § 5.5.4.
[90] See § 3.8.1.
[91] See § 4.5.4.

pattern of the ATR worldview, with its instrumental and legalist view of religion (‘*do ut des’*), is not taking over basic Christian convictions. It is first of all the Malawian theologians who should decide on the question if the lens of ‘*umunthu*’ indeed offers an effective appropriation of infant baptism in a context which is dominated by the ATR worldview. In an intercultural conversation, the question could be addressed whether and how a ‘*transformed umunthu*’ could be theologically fruitful in the wider Reformed family, which is, at its core, Christ-centred and thrives on a theology of grace and personal faith.[92]

7.4.3.3. Belonging to the Church

The meaning of belonging to the community of the church in the various contexts is affected by the position of Reformed Christians in their socio-religious context. In North India, ‘belonging to the Christian church’ is a highly sensitive topic. In Hindu perception, baptism causes not just a religious, but also a social divide, which alienates Christians from their ‘Indianness’.[93] The RPCI also has a strong communal character. Ironically, this bonding is also accentuated because Hindu relatives break the relationships with Christian converts, which stimulates the Christian church to function as a ‘new family’.[94] One father explains what moves Reformed Christians in North India: ‘*The church is a family, hundred or hundred and one per cent. (…) It gives us a foretaste of heaven. (…) If I’m not seeing the other person as a part of my family, there’s no point in me going to church. I can worship everywhere because God is everywhere. But why I go to church, is because God wants us to go to the place where God’s people gather.’ (E-21:23; father; 20+)*

Among Central Malawian CCAP Nkhoma church members, belonging to the church is often socially desirable, because for many people it is shameful not to belong to a church. The community of the CCAP Nkhoma is also important from a sociological point of view, as the church also takes over the traditional roles of ‘*umunthu*’.[95] A number of CCAP Nkhoma parents state that an unbaptized child is like an outcast in the family and the child does not belong to the church either.[96]

However, the inconsequent practice of infant baptism in CCAP Nkhoma suggests that many parents are not too worried about the consequences of not baptizing their child. In the background, there is the lingering question of trust in the effectiveness of Christian infant baptism as protection against witchcraft and evil forces. Several parents incorporate infant baptism into the ATR worldview and treat it as one of the rites of protection, to safeguard a good relationship between the child, the whole family and the community with the spiritual world.[97] Blood ties are strong and the baptismal water seems first of all to sanctify the blood ties of the extended family.[98]

The Malawian blood ties affect the practice of infant baptism in another way as well. On the one hand, parents refer to the danger of ‘generational sin’: if they are not faithful to God, the children might be punished for that. But there is also another side: several grandparents witnessed that they had their grandchildren baptized and that they brought them up in the faith because their own children fail to do so. Family members can take care of a little child, just as Myriam took care of her little brother Moses.[99] A teacher explains: ‘*When grandparents see that their own child is not really deeply rooted in Christian values, they will look for the good of their grandchild: “we have already lost our son or daughter - we should try to do good to our grandchild”*.’ (F-43:14; teacher; 30+)

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[92] Musopole, ‘Towards a Theological Method for Malawi’; Kwiyani, ‘Umunthu and the Spirituality of Leadership: Leadership Lessons from Malawi’.

[93] Kuttiyanikkal, *Khrist Bhakta Movement*.

[94] See § 3.7.3.2 and § 3.7.4. In § 3.4. I showed that this tension between Christian converts and Hindus is already there from the 19th century on.

[95] See § 4.5.4.

[96] See § 4.5.3.2.

[97] See § 4.5.2.2.

[98] See § 4.5.4.

[99] E-42:18; pastor; 40+.

In the individualistic Dutch context, RCN parents stress the personal relationship with God in baptism foremost. Parents explain that they feel proud to have their child baptized in front of the church and to promise publicly that they take responsibility for a Christian upbringing.[100] Some parents also address their newborn child in their testimony in the church: '*Today we celebrate and see in baptism that you are a child of God. God wants to be part of your life and He has good plans for you. (…) you don't have to be afraid, because God is always with you and He wants to take care of you.*'[101]

Infant baptism is not typically seen as an 'initiation' into the RCN and the relation between infant baptism and belonging to the church often remains unclear and is even denied by some parents.[102] One of the Dutch gatekeepers also observes that in the RCN, infant baptism is not really related to membership of the church.[103] This is quite remarkable because, as indicated earlier, the RCN has a tradition of being a strong and closed community.[104]

Next, Calvin speaks about 'adoption into the church' through baptism[105] and he characterizes infant baptism as the '*sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, so that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children*.'[106] To him, baptism is not so much an oath of a soldier to his commander (that would be Zwingli's position) as the commander receiving soldiers into his ranks. The core of the sacrament is that God promises that He will be our God and we shall be his people.[107] It is interesting to observe that in Calvin's practice in Geneva, too, grandparents sometimes brought their grandchildren for baptism. In his explanations of Gen. 17 and 1Cor. 7:14, Calvin clarifies that a child can be baptized if only one of the parents is a believer, but also when other family members take responsibility: God is generous in his adoption.[108]

The Heidelberg Catechism states that by baptism 'as a sign of the covenant, they must be grafted into the Christian church'. Also, the Westminster Standards characterize infant baptism as a sign of initiation into the visible church and relate it to the membership of the covenant.[109] Various baptismal forms concur that the children are sanctified in Christ and participate in the covenant and, therefore, as members of His Church, they 'ought to be baptized'.[110]

7.4.3.4. Personal Reflections

The 'belonging' aspect of infant baptism and the relation between infant baptism and the church is important in 'normative' Reformed theology. In the RPCI, in the North Indian context of social exclusion and oppression of Christians, baptism and the church as a 'new family' are more closely related. However, in the RPCI context, the personal 'belonging to God' is also clearly present.[111] The CCAP Nkhoma is situated in the communal Malawian society and infant baptism seems, not in the first place, to relate the child to the church but to the extended Christian family and to the larger community ('*umunthu*').[112] In practice it is clear, that this communality can also lead to a lack of

[100] See § 5.5.5.2.

[101] 'Vandaag mogen we vieren en door middel van de doop zien dat jij kind van God bent. Dat God onderdeel van jouw leven wil zijn en het beste met jou voor heeft. (…) je hoeft niet bang te zijn, omdat God altijd bij jou is en voor jou wil zorgen.' (E-187-baptismal testimony)

[102] See § 5.5.3.1 and § 5.5.4.

[103] D-205; gatekeeper.

[104] See § 5.3.

[105] Calvin, *Inst.*, chap. IV.15.1 / IV.15.12; Calvin, 'True Method', 275.

[106] Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.1.7 / IV.1.20 / IV.15.1.

[107] Ibid., IV.14.13.

[108] Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva*, 158; McKee, *Pastoral Ministry*, 411f. See for Calvin's understanding of infant baptism as adoption also: Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.15.20 / IV.16.4 / IV.16.9 and IV.16.31.

[109] WLC QA 165 / WSC QA 95 / WCF art. 28.

[110] See the current RCN baptismal forms and HC QA 74.

[111] See § 3.7.3.1 and § 3.7.3.3.

[112] See § 4.5.3.3 and § 4.5.4.

personal responsibility, as can be seen in the absence of the fathers at baptism in the CCAP Nkhoma In the Dutch RCN, there was also the possibility that grandparents could present their grandchildren for baptism. [113] For parents, the relationship between infant baptism and the church community of the RCN is much less clear in the individualistic Dutch context.[114]
This situation calls for further theological conversation on the relationship between infant baptism and church membership. This relationship was very obvious in the city Reformations of the 16th and 17th centuries in Western Europe, but it is much less clear in the more individualistic Dutch society of the 21st century, where many denominations exist next to each other. It is also different in communal Malawian society. In an intercultural conversation, it could be enriching for the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma respondents to listen to the way in which the North Indian RPCI or the Dutch RCN fathers take responsibility for the upbringing of their children. The North Indian communal society brings a different dynamic also because here Christianity is always on the verge of persecution and baptism functions as a boundary marker with the socio-religious Hindu-context.
Two Dutch pastors thought that moving the baptismal font to the entrance of the church building, as was mentioned by a respondent of the RPCI, was an inspiring idea to stress that infant baptism is also a sign of initiation into the church.[115]

7.4.3.5. Belonging to God and Christian Identity

In preparation for the research, I did not choose 'Christian identity' as a separate sensitizing concept but it emerged during the field research in the North-Indian RPCI, and, as it turned out, this concept also sheds light on the belonging aspect in other contexts. In the North Indian context of oppression and exclusion, RPCI parents refer to infant baptism as 'claiming the child for God' and belonging to the one true Christian God over and against the Hindu deities and religiosity and the possible influence of Hindu family members: '*We are set apart actually, of course, as children of God. But we are not very special … I mean, we all are sinners actually. (…) But when we believe in Christ, we are set apart for this world. We are no better than non-Christians. We all are sinners. But we are saved sinners.'* (E-21:9; father; 20+) In this way, infant baptism functions as a socio-religious boundary[116] and in the church order of the RPCI, infant baptism functions as an identity marker, essential for full membership.[117]
In the CCAP in Central Malawi, church leaders, pastors and elders often state that ATR and Christianity are mutually exclusive and participation in ATR practices (like traditional funerals) is not acceptable.[118] However, there is also a more inclusivist line of thinking. In the traditional understanding of the community ('*umunthu*'), 'blood is thicker than water': belonging to the 'natural' family is stronger than belonging to the 'spiritual family' of the church.[119] This also leads to a double practice of participation in both Christian and ATR rituals. This is different from the North Indian RPCI, where ordinary believers make a decisive choice for Christ even at the risk of losing their natural families.[120]
Some CCAP Nkhoma pastors mention their dream to be that the whole village will belong to the church and that in this way the natural and spiritual family will merge into a locally relevant 'Christian *umunthu*'.[121] A pastor says: '*the umunthu of the church and the village/tribe are not*

[113] See Joh. Jansen, *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordening* (Kampen, the Netherlands: Kok, 1976), 249; H Bouma, *Kerkorde van de gereformeerde kerken in Nederland* (Groningen: Vuurbaak, 1983), III-Art. 56-10.
[114] See § 5.5.3.1.
[115] D-201 / D-202.
[116] See § 3.7.3.3 and § 3.7.4.
[117] See § 3.7.
[118] See § 4.5.2.2 and § 4.5.9.1.
[119] See § 4.5.4.
[120] See § 3.7.4.
[121] See § 4.5.4.

conflicting, but the umunthu of the church is deeper because it draws its wisdom from the Word of God. In fact the umunthu of church and the village is one: we are not individuals, but a community, we share problems and help each other'. (F-40:3; pastor; 40+)
In the Dutch RCN, the aspect of 'belonging' functions mainly in the personal relationship with God: children are included in the fellowship with God, but nobody should be excluded. An RCN pastor stated that it has become taboo in the RCN to speak about baptism as a divide or identity marker over and against the children of non-believers.[122] RCN respondents typically reject the idea that the children of believers would be different, but they see them as privileged because they can hear about God from childhood on.[123] A father states: '*God says, of course, that His covenant is for us and for our children. Yes, and those other children don't belong to the covenant. That sounds rude perhaps… But, that, that, that is how it is, I think and that doesn't mean that they are not allowed to belong to Him, because they are allowed to hear [about God]*.[124] (E-184:9; father; 30+) Parents also refer to positive relationships with Evangelical friends and family members, who don't baptize their children but do bring them up in a Christian way.
The historical voice from Calvin in Geneva understands infant baptism not just as a formal boundary marker, but as the children of believers being separated from the '*unclean seed of idolaters*'.[125] Already in the womb of the mother, the children belong to the body of Christ and '*are separated from the common race of mankind by virtue of the covenant*'.[126] Because of the fact that children of believers belong to God through His election, they should be adopted into the church with the sign of baptism.[127] Calvin agrees that, because of God's covenant, the alienation from God because of sin is removed and the children are in a privileged situation to hear the word and receive the sacrament. In this way, God's fatherly love and the motherly care of the church are signified.[128]
The Reformed confessions speak in a similar vein. The Belgic Confession states that baptism is a sign of Christian identity and belonging to Christ: '*that we may wholly belong to Him whose mark and sign we bear*'.[129] Other Reformed confessions, too, teach that baptism sets believers '*apart from all other peoples and false religions*';[130] it separates Christians from unbelievers.[131]

7.4.3.6. Personal Reflections

In normative Biblical and Reformed theology, the ideas of baptism and of becoming a disciple of Jesus are closely connected.[132] Becoming part of Christ and a disciple of Christ also has the dimension of a boundary. It is striking that 'baptismal identity' as a seal of being holy or different from the world only functions in the North Indian RPCI context of oppression. In the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma and the Dutch RCN, the question of a Christian identity seems to receive little attention: it is

[122] Pastor 4, personal conversation 08-12-2021.
[123] See § 5.5.3.2.
[124] 'God zegt natuurlijk van dat Zijn verbond met ons is voor ons en onze kinderen. Ja, die andere kinderen horen niet bij het verbond. Dat klinkt misschien heel hard… Maar zo, zo, zo is het wel, denk ik, en dat betekent niet dat zij niet bij Hem mogen horen, want ze mogen wel horen [over God].'
[125] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.16.6.
[126] Calvin, 'True Method', 347.
[127] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.12 / IV.16.7; Calvin, 'True Method', 275.348; Jean Calvin, 'Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote', in *Calvin's Tracts Containing Antidote to the Council of Trent, Germen Interim with Refutation and True Method of Reforming the Church, Conforming to Roman Rites; Psychopannychia or Imaginary Sleep of the Soul between Death and Judgment*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 3 (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin translation society, 1844), 109.
[128] McKee, *Pastoral Ministry*, 413f. See also § 6.1.
[129] BC art. 34. See also: Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.1.
[130] BC art. 34.
[131] HC QA 74. See also: WConf art. 27, see also: WLC QA 162.
[132] References in the baptismal forms are for example: Mat. 28:18, Acts 2:40 and Rom. 12:2

either a socially affirmed form of belonging (CCAP Nkhoma)[133] or a matter of individual choice and preference (RCN).[134]
An intercultural conversation could offer fresh and critical perspectives on the question of baptismal identity. In a shared attention to God, pastors and ordinary believers in the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma and the Dutch RCN could reflect on how the North Indian RPCI shapes baptismal identity — not as a social tradition or a human-centred religiosity (CCAP Nkhoma), nor as a free and individual human choice (RCN), but as being engrafted in Christ's death and resurrection, because of God's eternal election and adoption and by living a resurrected life with Christ as a fruit of baptism (Rom. 6).

7.5. Appropriating Infant Baptism: Behaving

The third aspect of appropriation of infant baptism which I discern is 'behaving'. This relates to the actual 'performance' of infant baptism: agents, acts, words, material and liturgical elements, as well as the moment and mode of infant baptism, which shape the concrete rite in its socio-religious context. Behaving also entails the impact of infant baptism on the lives of parents and baptized children. I am not pursuing participant observation, therefore I thematised this aspect in the interviews by asking questions, such as: 'What did the preparation for infant baptism look like'? 'How was the baptismal service and baptism itself performed?' 'How does the fact that you had your child baptized affect the way you bring it up'?'[135]

7.5.1. Sensitizing concepts

At the outset, I formulated three sensitizing concepts for the aspect of 'behaving': a. baptismal instruction and preparation; b. baptism — an embodied rite; c. responsibility of the parents/Christian upbringing.
All sensitizing concepts proved to be relevant, while two new concepts were also observed: the 'mode of baptism' and 'obedience', as infant baptism is often perceived as an act of obedience to God. The interaction in the three contexts with the non-Reformed environment affects the aspect of behaving and shows typical contextual variations, such as:
- Delaying the moment of baptism till the child can at least see and understand something of the rite of baptism (North Indian RPCI); [136]
- Absence of the fathers at the baptism of their children (Central Malawian CCAP Nkhoma);[137]
- Testimony of the parents at infant baptism (Dutch RCN).[138]

7.5.2. Common Ground

In the research contexts, we observed some common ground with respect to the behaving aspect of infant baptism, on which most of the pastors and ordinary believers agreed, even though the actual performance of the rite of infant baptism differs from context to context. Ordinary believers often indicate that there is little explanation of the meaning of infant baptism and indicate that they hardly ever reflect on the meaning of infant baptism. Often, respondents say that their own parents never explained to them why they had them baptized as children. In the North Indian RPCI, instruction is done in membership classes and in the sermon at baptism. The parents also have a personal meeting with the church council beforehand, where they explain their motivation for requesting baptism for their child.[139] In the CCAP Nkhoma, there is a short meeting on Saturday

[133] See § 5.4.5.
[134] See § 5.5.3.2.
[135] See chapter 2 of this paper for a methodological justification.
[136] See § 3.7.5.2.
[137] See § 4.5.5.2 and § 4.5.9.5.
[138] See § 5.5.8.2 and § 5.5.5.1.
[139] See § 3.7.5.1.

evening, right before baptism, with all parents together.[140] In the Netherlands, the pastor or an elder will visit the parents at home, where the baptismal service is discussed and parents are usually invited to contribute to the preparation (for example, by choosing songs or a Biblical text for the sermon), but there is not always an explanation of the meaning of infant baptism.[141] In the research contexts, there is always some explanation of the meaning of infant baptism during the baptismal service, for which often a baptismal form is used.
In the act of baptism, plain water is used and the Trinitarian formula is pronounced over the child. The North Indian RPCI and the Dutch RCN respondents testify that the parental promise at baptism makes them feel responsible for the Christian upbringing of their children.[142] In the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma, the parents place the main accent on God's protection and not on their own responsibility.[143] Finally, many ordinary believers in the research contexts mention that they believe infant baptism is God's ordination, just as in the Old Testament circumcision was a requirement in God's covenant with his people.[144]
In the research contexts, the normative and formal voices of theology teach infant baptism as the Biblical and Reformed way of baptism, but for many ordinary believers, infant baptism is more an option, next to dedication and parents often show understanding for those who leave it up to the child to make its own choice.[145]

7.5.3. Intercultural Conversations on Behaving

For this aspect of appropriation, I listen to the normative, formal and espoused voices from the research contexts, as well as to the formal voices of Calvin and the baptismal forms, the normative voice of the Reformed confessions and I bring these voices into conversation and conclude with some reflections. I will address the questions of divine agency in infant baptism, baptism as an embodied practice and the mode of baptism.

7.5.3.1. Divine Agency in Infant Baptism?

With regard to the aspect of behaving, an important question is: who is acting during infant baptism — the parents, the pastor, or God...?
For many of the interviewed North Indian RPCI believers, the water of baptism is no more than a rite performed by the pastor, an illustration of the doctrine of salvation. They reject any magical understanding of infant baptism as spending salvation, to avoid any association with Hindu water rituals. They stress that, at baptism, they bring the child to God and take responsibility for the Christian upbringing of the child. For these parents, infant baptism seems to be close to child dedication, in which the parents and the pastor are the agent', but God's activity is not mentioned.[146] For other RPCI parents, however, infant baptism is a place of divine activity.[147] They point to God making a covenant, like with Abraham: '*(Baptism is) not like supernatural power or something like that. It is God's sign of God's covenant of grace with us, and as well as with our children.*' (E-19:6; mother; 20+). God's activity is not specifically related to the water sign, but to the baptismal liturgy as a whole.[148] At the same time, we have seen earlier that many RPCI parents

[140] See § 4.5.5.1.
[141] See § 5.5.5.1.
[142] See for the North Indian RPCI § 3.7.5.4 and § 3.7.5.5; for the Dutch RCN see § 5.5.5.2 and § 5.5.9.1.
[143] See § 4.5.9.1.
[144] For the North Indian RPCI see § 3.7.5.2. For the Dutch RCN see § 5.5.1 and § 5.5.3.1. In the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma this is only mentioned in the baptismal form, but not by the respondents.
[145] See for the North Indian RPCI § 3.7 and § 3.8.1; for the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma § 4.5.6.4; for the Dutch RCN § 5.5.5.2.
[146] See § 3.7.5.4 and § 3.7.5.5.
[147] See § 3.7.3.1.
[148] See § 3.7.7.1.

believe, that infant baptism also provides protection against Hindu influences (§ 7.3.3.3). Thus, the rejection of infant baptism as a 'magical' power, does not make infant baptism 'ineffective', as God offers protection through it.

For the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma respondents, the liturgy and rite of infant baptism as a whole is an important event. Parents explain that they make a covenant with God and that infant baptism seals and signifies that the child is now at God's side. In the battle between God and evil spirits for the soul of the child, infant baptism is a spiritual 'weapon' of protection, in which the solemn words of the baptismal form, spoken by the pastor, are important. Other than with the North Indian RPCI believers, the stress is not on God's initiative, but on the making of the covenant by the parents.[149] However, parents trust that after baptism God will protect the child: '*We tell the child: we have baptized you. The children feel that something great has happened to them. (…) The child will be happy and by God's grace, he will refrain from certain things. God is already working in the baptized children in giving grace and guidance.'* (F-50:9; father; 20+)

Most interviewed Dutch RCN members believe that God is acting in infant baptism, but they typically don't relate this to the act of baptism itself, but to the whole of the baptismal liturgy. They are impressed most by the songs, the prayer or the sermon. God is believed to be actively present in infant baptism, giving His promises, but the agency of the parents, especially in giving a personal testimony on the convictions about the meaning of infant baptism, is deemed important.[150]

Listening to the voices of Calvin and the Reformed confessions, we observe the importance of God's activity in the sacraments. Calvin states: baptism '*is to be received as from the hand of the Author himself, that it is he who purifies and washes away sins, and wipes out the remembrance of them; that it is He who makes us sharers in his death, who deprives of his rule, who weakens the power of our lust; indeed, that it is He who comes into a unity with us so that, having put on Christ, we may be acknowledged God's children.*'[151] The sacraments do not point to an absent Redeemer but are symbols through which Christ is present and acting.[152] Calvin adds two more arguments when advocating the use of the sacraments. God gives sacraments to the believers because of their human weakness, to make them 'more certain' of the trustworthiness of God's Word.[153] They appeal to our human responsibility and obedience and urge the believer to observe infant baptism. However, there is a final argument, which touches especially on the spiritual value of the sacrament. Calvin points to an 'extra dimension'[154] of the sacraments, as compared to the Word and writes: '*as He communicates his riches and blessings to us by his Word, so He distributes them to us by his sacraments*'.[155] The sacraments are not just an illustration of the Word, but they also make a '*deeper impression*' and God Himself is communicating through the sacraments, through the power of the Holy Spirit.[156] Whereas in a sermon grace is preached to the whole congregation, in the sacraments it is offered in a very personal way.

In the same vein, the Belgic Confession states that a sacrament is not just a human profession of faith, but a God-given means of grace ('seal'), which is used by the Holy Spirit: God promises to wash

[149] See § 4.5.5.3.

[150] See § 5.5.5.1.

[151] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.14. See also: Calvin, 'Antidote', 180; Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.16. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 139f.

[152] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.1.9.

[153] Calvin, *Inst.* IV.14.6. See also BC art. 33.

[154] Allusion to: Heiko A. Oberman, 'Die 'Extra'-Dimension in der Theologie Calvins', in *Die Reformation: von Wittenberg nach Genf* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 253–82.

[155] Calvin, 'Form Baptism', 115.

[156] Jean Calvin, 'Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine Concerning the True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper, in Order to Dissipate the Mists of Tileman Heshusius', in *Tracts Containing Treatises on the Sacraments, Catechism of the Church of Geneva, Forms of Prayer, and Confessions of Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 2, Tracts Relating to the Reformation (Edinburgh: Calvin translation society, 1844), 567.

away the sin of the child by the blood of Christ.[157] The Westminster Confession expresses the same thought: '*by the right use of this ordinance [baptism - jjac], the grace promised is not only offered but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost*.[158] The Heidelberg Catechism states that '*Through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them [the children — jjac] no less than to adults.*'[159] Concerning the 'extra dimension' of the sacraments, the Heidelberg Catechism says that the sacraments '*more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the Gospel*'.[160] The Westminster Confession adds that, in comparison to the Old Testament, the New Testament sacraments are '*fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity and less outward glory, yet in them it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy*'.[161] We can conclude that the theological conviction that in baptism God Himself assures the believer, that the spoken promise is true for her here and now, is part of the normative and formal Reformed tradition up until today.[162]

7.5.3.2. Personal Reflections

Even though there is great emphasis on the Word in the Reformed tradition, the normative and formal voices of Reformed theology also point to divine agency and an 'extra dimension' of infant baptism as a means of grace in comparison to the Word. In the research contexts, a substantial number of ordinary believers do not recognize this extra dimension and, to them, infant baptism is not more than child dedication or an expression of the faith of the parents. Those who speak about God's activity, understand this not first of all in a soteriological sense (washing or sprinkling as a sign of forgiveness of sin or renewal by the Holy Spirit), but as protective (Malawi - CCAP Nkhoma and North India - RPCI) or therapeutic (Dutch - RCN).

Even though God's activity in and through the sacraments will always remain a mystery' in an intercultural conversation the spiritual efficacy, divine activity and extra dimension in infant baptism could be explored further: how does the visible and tangible sacrament not only exhibit, but also 'seal' God's grace and how does this affect the believers spiritually? In the ecumenical conversation with Evangelical-Pentecostal Christians, too, this is an important theme: if infant baptism is indeed a promising act of God (administered by human servants) then it can indeed function as a powerful means of grace through which the Holy Spirit works, to give spiritual strength and sanctification to parents, the congregation and later to the child. It is also a promise of God's help in the spiritual battle against sin and Satan. In this way, infant baptism is also clearly different from child dedication. However, if infant baptism is not more than a 'wet dedication' and the testimony of the parents is central instead of the divine promise, we cannot avoid the question of whether infant baptism as a rite in the Reformed tradition still has a distinct meaning and if it is a sustainable rite in future?

7.5.3.3. Embodiment

In the research contexts, the visible and tangible water sign of infant baptism does not seem to touch the hearts or feelings of the Reformed believers. This raises questions about the meaning and impact of the physicality ('embodiment') of infant baptism.

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[157] BC art. 33. See also: BC art. 34 / HC QA 72-73 / WCF art. 27 / WSC 91. C. Trimp, *Woord, water en wijn. Gedachten over prediking, doop en avondmaal* (Kampen, the Netherlands: Kok, 1985), 105f.

[158] WCF art. 28. Also: WLC QA 165.

[159] HC QA 74.

[160] HC QA 66.

[161] WCF art.7.

[162] See also: Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper*, 190f. See also: Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge, 1995), 31f; Melvin Tinker, 'Language, Symbols and Sacraments. Was Calvin's View of the Lord's Supper Right?', *Churchman* 112, no. 2 (1998): 131–49.

The North Indian RPCI functions in a Hindu context, with an abundance of sacramentality and embodiment. However, the embodiment and sacramentality of infant baptism receive little attention from pastors and believers. In the RPCI, sprinkling is the preferred mode of baptism, a 'testimony of our Reformed identity', over and against the Evangelical-Pentecostal movement. There is also a contextual argument: sprinkling has less similarity to the Hindu practices of bathing and it can be easily performed inside the church.[163] The stress on sprinkling among some of the RPCI pastors shows the desire for self-identification of the 'formal voice' over and against Evangelical-Pentecostal churches and Hindu practices, even though this conviction is not really shared by many ordinary believers.

The postponement of infant baptism by RPCI parents till the children are two years old or older (up to eight years old), so that the child might see or remember something from infant baptism, is not based on a desire for more embodiment, but is meant to preclude re-baptism in an Evangelical-Pentecostal church at a later point in the life of the child.[164] A missionary describes: *'Pentecostal pastors will ask: Did you get baptism? Okay. Then when was that? Do you remember? (…) See, when I got baptism, I didn't know that. It was a very early age. I don't remember. (…) Then now at least if I ask my elder daughter, or younger one also. They are both baptized on one day. And at least they know that.'* (F-18:6; missionary; 40+)

In the CCAP Nkhoma sprinkling is the only mode of baptism, but the visible sign does not seem to make a strong impression. Parents often believe in the protective effect of infant baptism, but they do not attribute the effectiveness of baptism to the water sign, but to the words of prayer and the baptismal form, spoken by the pastor. These words have nearly magical power, comparable to the power attributed to words in ATR and words in Evangelical-Pentecostal churches in the Malawian context.[165]

RCN pastors and theologians observe that, in the past, there was one-sided attention to the dogmatic and intellectual meaning of infant baptism, which caused a lack of attention to its embodiment, sacramentality and divine activity.[166] For most interviewed RCN church members the act of sprinkling is not a sign that touches them and several parents acknowledge that they don't understand the meaning of the baptismal water.[167] Some respondents indicate that they envy the Evangelical practice of adult baptism by immersion, because of its visuality and embodiment.[168] Today, some RCN believers ask for infant baptism by immersion and in several RCN churches today this is an option.

Calvin, the Reformed confessions and the baptismal forms, typically regarded the mode of baptism as non-essential; both sprinkling and immersion are acceptable, even though sprinkling is the typical mode.[169]

7.5.3.4. Personal Reflections

The minimalist practice of baptismal sprinkling in the Reformed tradition faces the reality that ordinary believers have difficulty understanding the water sign in a meaningful way or relating the

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[163] See § 3.7.5.3. See also, in general, on sacraments in the RPCI: Chacko, 'Towards a Reformed Understanding of Sacraments in the Asian Context'.

[164] See § 3.7.5.2 and § 3.7.6.

[165] See § 4.5.5.1. This is also mentioned in: Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity*, 51f.

[166] De Jong, 'Heaven Down Here'; J. M. Burger, 'Receiving the Mind of Christ: Epistemological and Hermeneutical Implications of Participation in Christ According to Oliver O'Donovan', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 10, no. 1 (1 January 2016): 52–71. In the background we observe the influence of publications such as: Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*.

[167] E-160:12; father; 30+ / F-164:10; deacon; 40+ / E-169:14; mother; 30+.

[168] See § 5.5.7.1.

[169] See, e.g. Calvin, *Inst.* IV.15.19. The classical baptismal form mentions immersion and sprinkling as equivalent forms of baptism.

central notions of infant baptism (for example, washing of sin and union with Christ) to the sign of sprinkling.
The different attitudes to the embodiment of infant baptism are related to the various contexts and settings in which the Reformed churches and Christians live. In the North Indian RPCI, some pastors take a strict stance with regard to sprinkling as the distinctive form of the Reformed rite of infant baptism. Some Dutch gatekeepers consider this to be an overreaction.[170] In the CCAP Nkhoma, there is a lack of attention to the embodiment, and infant baptism is not experienced as an impressive rite. However, African authors such as Mbiti and Asamoah-Gyadu stress the importance of sacramental tangibility in the African context. They deem it essential for African Christians that God can be related to their concrete needs and human flourishing: fertility (children and harvest) and economic prosperity. Mbiti writes that '*through the Sacraments, the New Testament provides us with an open channel of communication from the material to the spiritual*'.[171] The findings of this research show that, in the rite of infant baptism, this is not yet effectuated in the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma.
In the Dutch RCN, there is growing attention to sacramentality and embodiment. In the past, several RCN professors and pastors have expressed that immersion would reflect the meaning of baptism better than sprinkling.[172] This never resulted in a reconsideration of the practice of sprinkling, but today we witness a change in perception, stimulated by the attraction of immersion in the Evangelical-Pentecostal tradition, as well as the desire for more experience and embodiment in the Dutch socio-cultural context.
The intercultural conversation opened my eyes to the importance of embodiment. The typical Reformed position, i.e., that the mode of baptism is not relevant, was at first a reaction to the Medieval Roman Catholic practice with its many additions to the 'simple rite' of baptism.[173] The lack of attention to the embodiment can also be traced back to a modern and Western rationalistic attitude to the sacraments. However, the intercultural conversation shows that the question of meaningful appropriation of the water sign is present in all three research contexts. This makes clear that further research and theological reflection on this topic are needed. Finally, it is probable that the conviction that the mode of infant baptism is indifferent was 'exported' by Western Reformed missionaries to the North Indian RPCI and the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma. However, in light of this research, I believe that the question of embodiment needs re-consideration. The involvement of ordinary believers in this conversation is indispensable, as it is clear, that they are no 'passive receptors' of the existing practice, but actively appropriating the rite of infant baptism.

7.6. Appropriating Infant Baptism: Experiencing

In this fourth aspect of the appropriation of infant baptism, I enquire into the religious experience concerning the rite of infant baptism. I pay special attention to the experience of God's active presence in and through infant baptism.

7.6.1. Sensitizing Concepts

The sensitizing concept of 'religious experience' was designed, based on my understanding of the 'normative' Reformed tradition and was intended to pay attention to:
- The feelings and emotions of especially the ordinary believers who bring their child for baptism and church members who witness infant baptism
- Sacramental fellowship with Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

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[170] D-202.
[171] Mbiti, *NT Eschatology*, 117f.
[172] Trimp, *De gemeente en haar liturgie*, 191; Venema, *Wat is een christen nodig te geloven?*, 242; van der Laan, *Eenmaal gedoopt*, 168f; See already: Bouwman, *Gereformeerd kerkrecht*, 2:316.
[173] See § 6.3.1.

Because ordinary believers testified to divine or evil spiritual presence in the field research, not only in their daily lives but also related to infant baptism, two new sensitizing concepts came to the fore during the interviews:
- Divine presence;
- Evil spiritual presence (Satan; witches; demons).
These concepts also helped to perceive the normative Reformed voices on infant baptism from a fresh perspective.

7.6.2. Common Ground

Finally, in the research contexts, we observed some common ground concerning the experiential aspect of infant baptism, on which most of the pastors and ordinary believers agreed. Infant baptism gives joy and personal assurance to the parents because the covenantal fellowship with God is signified and sealed to them in infant baptism: the child is protected as God cares for His child. For the normative and formal voices of the Reformed theology of infant baptism, God's performative presence in infant baptism by giving his promises through the pastor is beyond doubt. Several parents in each of the research contexts remember their experience of God's active and 'nearly tangible' presence during the rite of infant baptism. This experience was not mentioned by pastors of the RPCI in North India or the RCN in the Netherlands, but some Malawian CCAP Nkhoma pastors mentioned such experiences among the congregation members. This experience of divine presence was usually not triggered by the water sign of baptism but by the songs or the words pronounced by the pastor. Respondents who described these experiences of divine presence, trust they will receive the promised protection signified to them in the baptism.[174]

7.6.3. Intercultural Conversation on Experiencing

In this section, I wish to listen to the normative, formal and espoused voices from the research contexts, as well as to the historical formal voice of Calvin, the normative voice of the Reformed confessions and the formal voices of the baptismal forms, to conclude with some reflections. Our main focus is the experience of divine presence by ordinary believers.

7.6.3.1. Experience of Divine Presence

In each research context, several ordinary believers talked about their experience of God's activity and presence in and through infant baptism. Most pastors and teachers did not speak about these experiences — neither pertaining to themselves nor to their congregation members. However, one pastor from the North Indian RPCI indicated that he always had the idea that parents experience God's presence at infant baptism but that he was never sure about this. The research convinced him of the reality of this experience.[175] Some pastors of the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma confirmed that congregation members have such experiences.[176]
The North Indian RPCI parents who mentioned a nearly tangible experience of 'intensified divine presence' at infant baptism explained how they are assured of God's Fatherly care.[177] God's presence at baptism is related to the divine origin of this sacrament of the covenant and not so much to the sacrament itself: God takes the initiative, He elects his children and makes a covenant. Baptism assures also North Indian RPCI parents of the protection and power of the one true Christian God, even in the sight of Hindu deities, demonic forces or the imposing attitude of Hindu relatives.[178] One mother states: '*It is a symbol to cover. Like to, to put a covering, you know, God is*

[174] For the North Indian RPCI see § 3.7.7.1. For the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma see § 4.5.7.1. For the Dutch RCN see § 5.5.7.1.
[175] Personal letter dd. 20-12-2021
[176] § 4.5.7.1.
[177] See § 3.7.7.1 / § 3.8.4.
[178] See § 3.7.7.1 and § 3.7.8.

there, He is going to cleanse, you know, putting that mark or seal of His authority, His power over his life.'

Some of the CCAP Nkhoma believers said that at the baptism of their child they experienced the protective power of God. God can be approached without the mediation of ancestors or other spiritual beings, but He remains a 'high God', thus there is no personal encounter with God at infant baptism. Parents stress the human initiative in making a covenant with God and dedicating their child to Him: now that they brought the child for baptism, God will do his part and protect the child against evil forces and bad people and keep it away from sin.[179] A mother says after baptism: '*Now I feel very confident, because I know that my children are protected. (…) I know that I take those children in the hands of God. Yes. Now I told them that now you don't do bad things because you are protected by God.*' (E-66:1; mother; 40+)

Several RCN ordinary believers also mention God's activity at infant baptism, but they understand God's presence, first of all, as a 'performative act' through the administration of the sacrament: God seals his promise to be the heavenly Father of the child and to always care for it (adoption).[180] They point to the responsibility of the parents for the Christian upbringing of their children in an aggressively secularizing context.[181] In addition to this, several Dutch parents mention experiences of intense divine presence, of God's love and assurance during the baptismal service.[182] One mother says: '*You promise something to God, but then you also feel that God, kind of is stretching out his hand to you, like I, I, I, I care for you, I care for your child, I gave you this child, take good care of it, that, that is what you really feel at that moment…*'[183]

The normative Reformed voice of the confessions understands the sacrament of baptism as an assurance of the faith and a 'means of grace': the spoken Word and the material element of water together function as an 'instrument' of the Holy Spirit. This is what was referred to earlier as the 'extra dimension' of infant baptism.[184] The Heidelberg Catechism mentions a personal promise to the children of believers.[185] Even though the Reformed confessions do not mention a 'personal' divine presence in baptism, the classical baptismal form and Calvin use strong expressions when they speak about God's assurance in infant baptism.[186] The form for infant baptism states: *'God the Holy Spirit assures us by this sacrament that He will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ, imparting to us what we have in Christ, namely, the cleansing from our sins and the daily renewal of our lives (…)'*.[187]

7.6.3.2. Personal Reflection

Firstly, ordinary believers in the research contexts describe God's active presence as an immediate and personal, nearly mystical experience: He is believed to be 'standing there', and 'stretching out his hand' in a nearly tangible way. Infant baptism as a performative act of divine promise, as expressed in normative Reformed theology and the baptismal forms, seems not very meaningful for many ordinary believers today. Instead, we see a shift to an experience of intensified divine presence.

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[179] See § 4.5.7.1, § 4.5.8 and § 4.5.9.2.
[180] See § 5.5.7.1.
[181] See § 5.5.9.2.
[182] See § 5.5.7.1.
[183] 'Je belooft zelf iets richting God, maar daarin voel je ook dat God zeg maar Zijn hand naar jou uitsteekt van he, ik, ik, ik zorg voor jou, ik zorg voor je kind, ik heb jou dit kind gegeven, zorg er goed voor, dat, dat voel je op dat moment wel…' (E-161:7; mother; 30+).
[184] See above § 7.5.3.1 and § 7.5.3.2.
[185] HC QA 74. See also BC art. 34.
[186] § 6.5.6. See als: Bierma, *Font of Pardon and New Life*, 159f.
[187] Canadian Reformed Churches, *Book of Praise*, 584.

Secondly, other than in normative Reformed theology, respondents have little attention to the work of the Holy Spirit in infant baptism. Because this is the same in three very different contexts, it would appear that this lack of attention is not just related to contextual influences. A further intercultural conversation could show whether this omission of the activity of the Holy Spirit is due to a lack of meaningful understanding in relation to infant baptism, if this is a flaw in the theological teaching of the pastors, or whether there are other (contextual?) reasons.
Thirdly, shared attention to the Triune God as the main 'Agent' in infant baptism, and special attention to the role of Christ and the Holy Spirit in baptism could create rppm for an intercultural conversation of the experienced intensified divine presence. For most interviewees, it is clear that infant baptism is ordained by God or Christ. For them, God is always in some way present when children are baptized. There were also a number of ordinary believers for whom infant baptism seemed to be comparable to child dedication, a prayer to God and a dedication of the child into God's care — ordained by God, but without actual divine activity or presence.
What most impressed me as the researcher was learning that, for many ordinary believers, infant baptism indeed functions as a sacrament, a means of grace, in which God acts and through which they are assured of God's promise of protection and care and his presence as a faithful God in daily life.[188] In addition to this, I discovered that, when practised in faith, infant baptism can open up a sacred space for encountering the living God.[189] The fact that this experience was not confined to one socio-religious environment indicates that infant baptism can function as a 'means of grace', ordained by God.

7.7. The Way Forward: Questions for Future Conversations on Infant Baptism

Based on the intercultural conversation, I would like to name some questions and topics which demand attention for the Reformed theology and practice of infant baptism. I also wish to indicate a direction in which appropriations of infant baptism by Reformed believers could be developed and discussed further.

7.7.1. Embodiment and Excarnation

In the Reformed tradition, there is a certain priority of the Word over the sacraments.[190] This can lead to what Taylor calls 'excarnation': 'the transfer of our religious life out of bodily forms of ritual, worship, practice so that it comes more and more to reside "in the head"'.[191] The intercultural conversation shows that the questions of excarnation are not only at stake in the late modern and secularizing Dutch context. The visible water sign itself is, in each of the research contexts, not very impressive for ordinary believers.[192]
This seems to be in line with what anthropologist Keane and others have called the 'dematerialization' of the sacraments in the Reformed Calvinist tradition.[193] Keane states that, because for Calvin the visible elements are just 'earthly means through which God accommodates Himself to our capacities', the material elements of the sacraments are, by definition, less important

[188] See § 7.5.3.2 and § 7.7.2.
[189] See § 7.7.2.
[190] See also BC art. 33 and HC QA 66 and 67. I cannot discuss here the legitimacy of this priority, but reading the Gospel of John or Paul, or Augustine on the sacraments, one cannot deny that there is a legitimate place for rationality in the Christian faith.
[191] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 554.613.
[192] For North India RCPI see § 3.7.1.2; for Malawi CCAP Nkhoma see § 4.5.9.1 and 4.5.9.2; for The Netherlands RCN see § 5.5.1.3 and § 5.5.9.3.
[193] The question if this is indeed typical for the Calvinist tradition, or that it is a broader feature of the Protestant tradition, the early Modern period or the Western context cannot be discussed here.

than the spiritual reality:[194] In Reformed theology, it is believed that God's grace is given directly, not mediated through rituals or sacraments or the performance of a priest.[195] Instead, in Calvinism the stress is, according to Keane, on sacramental language: 'it is language's capacity for conveying immaterial meanings that renders it the most suitable medium between merely material things and that which is fully divine.'[196] The result is that the Word, the prayer, the sermon and the baptismal forms are central in the traditional Reformed baptismal liturgy.
However, there is also another strand of thinking in the Calvinist Reformed tradition. Calvin points to the 'extra dimension' of the sacraments[197] and the Heidelberg Catechism states that the sacraments declare 'more fully' the promise of the Gospel.[198] The Belgic Confession claims that the Holy Spirit as our divine teacher uses visible instruments not only to help us understand God's promises better but also to 'seal' the promises and to work out salvation and renewal or sanctification in the believer.[199] However, this own function or extra dimension of the sacraments in Calvin and the Reformed confessions does not seem to resonate with many of the ordinary believers in the research contexts. Rather, a number of respondents in CCAP Nkhoma (Malawi) and the RCN (Netherlands) have difficulty interpreting the function of the visible water sign.[200] Interestingly, respondents in North Indian RPCI were generally aware of the symbolic function of the baptismal water as a sign of washing, but they made it especially clear that the water does not provide salvation or forgiveness. As one father states: '*I am not saying since he has taken the baptism he has been saved. I do not think that. He's still not saved, I mean like he is in the process. There is like… he needs to come to that realization that he is a sinner and he needs a Saviour*'. (E-24:13; father; 20+). In this way the full accent is on the Word and not on the visible baptismal sign.
On the basis of the research, I would contend that an intercultural conversation on the sacramentality and embodiment of infant baptism in relation to the framework of Reformed confessions and baptismal forms is important for understanding and considering the various baptismal practices we encountered, such as the emphasis on sprinkling in North India, infant baptism by immersion in the Netherlands, but also the re-framing of adult baptism as a commemoration of infant baptism through sprinkling or immersion.[201] In this context, it would also be interesting to consider Barnard's remark that 'the tendency towards baptism or even commemoration of baptism by means of immersion reverses the renewal of the baptism ritual that was realised at the time of the Reformation.'[202] He stresses that as a result of the Reformation baptism was performed in the worship service, but it became 'as good as invisible for the congregation and (…) the use of water was minimal'.[203]

7.7.2. Divine Presence: Touched by the Holy One

The research shows that the meaning of infant baptism as expressed in the Reformed confessions is broadened by a fresh appropriation, in which the rite of infant baptism becomes a locus for the experience of divine presence. Parents experience the presence of being touched by the Holy One,

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[194] Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 61f. See for a comparable position: Barnard, Cilliers, and Wepener, *Worship in the Network Culture*, 212.
[195] Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 67.
[196] Ibid., 66.
[197] Calvin § 6.2.1. See also: J. Todd Billings, 'John Calvin and the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper: A Contemporary Appraisal', in *Restoration through Redemption: John Calvin Revisited*, ed. Henk van den Belt (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013), 178f; van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 219f; 424f.
[198] HC QA 66
[199] BC art. 33 and see Calvin, above § 6.2.
[200] See for CCAP Nkhoma § 4.5.1.3 and for the RCN § 5.5.1.3.
[201] Voorberg, *Doop en kerk*, 234.450.
[202] Barnard, Cilliers, and Wepener, *Worship in the Network Culture*, 212.
[203] Ibid.

which assures them of God's protection, availability and care.[204] This appropriation occurs in various contexts: in the multi-religious Hindu context of the RPCI, in the religiously hybrid Malawian ATR context of the CCAP Nkhoma, as well as in the 'empty' secularized environment of the RCN.[205] In our research, several parents divulged that they unexpectedly experienced a 'touch of the Holy One' at infant baptism.[206] This experience came for them 'from outside', and they experienced this as a 'divine presence' and a 'real encounter' with God. This experience of divine immediacy is different from the assurance that the Holy Spirit gives in the heart of the believers in and through the visible and tangible 'means of grace'.[207]

In the Reformed confessions and baptismal forms, there is the conviction that the sacraments are instituted by God and Christ and therefore the believers can trust that if they use these 'means of grace', the Holy Spirit will indeed foster their faith and work renewal in the heart of the believers.[208] This idea is shared by ordinary believers: God ordained infant baptism, so we can trust that He blesses us when we keep his instruction.[209]

In the secular context of the West, Immink has demanded attention for the activity of the Holy Spirit and the presence of the 'holy' in the liturgy.[210] According to him, the liturgy has the 'ability to open up levels of reality which are inaccessible to the discursive mind'.[211] For Immink, the role of the Holy Spirit is crucial here.[212] However, the fresh appropriations seem to go further and testify about experiences of an intensified presence of the 'Holy One' in the liturgy.

Deeper intercultural reflection on the meaning of divine activity and God's 'real presence' in infant baptism could be significant for the future of Reformed theology and the practice of infant baptism. An intercultural conversation could also explore deeper, if and how infant baptism today could function as a means of grace, an instrument of the Holy Spirit to unite believers with Christ and other believers.

7.7.3. Re-calibrating Narratives of Infant Baptism

On the basis of the findings in the research contexts, believe, that for the future of the Reformed theology and practice of infant baptism, it is important to develop fresh context-sensitive baptismal narratives by 're-sourcing' or 're-calibrating' the Biblical-theological meaning of infant baptism today. As observed earlier, the Biblical references made by the respondents mainly focussed on the question of the legitimacy of infant baptism. However, fruitful fresh appropriation ask for a clear

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[204] I do not have empirical data to decide whether this is a new appropriation or that this existed already earlier among Reformed believers, but was just never expressed or 'heard'.

[205] See above § 7.3.3.3.

[206] See above § 7.6.3.1.

[207] Calvin, *Inst.* III.1.3. Dowey writes about 'theophany' in Calvin's thought: 'a real, but spiritual, presence that is represented by, but not to be identified with, the physical or visionary appearance', Edward A. Dowey, *Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1952), 13.

[208] See HC QA 66; BelConf, 33 and § 6.2.1 and § 6.2.3 for Calvin's position.

[209] See for North India RCPI: E-19:5.8; mother; 20+ / E-21:19; father; 20+ / E-24:10; father; 20+. For CCAP Nkhoma (Malawi) see E-55:9; father; 30+ / E-148:6; mother; 30+. For RCN (Netherlands) only a pastor referred to this: F-178:6; pastor; 30+.

[210] F. Gerrit Immink, 'Meal and Sacrament: How Do We Encounter the Lord at the Table?', in *Religious Identity and the Invention of Tradition*, eds A. W. J. Houtepen and Jan Willem van Henten (Assen, The Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 265–75. See also for the same ideas: Immink, *Het heilige gebeurt*, 47f.

[211] Immink, 'Meal and Sacrament', 274.

[212] Immink, *Het heilige gebeurt*, 77ff. See also for the liturgy as human answer to God's initiative and a 'real encounter': Trimp, *Klank en weerklank*; F. Gerrit Immink, 'Een dubbele beweging', in *De weg van de liturgie: tradities, achtergronden, praktijk*, eds N.A Schuman, Marcel Barnard, and Paul Oskamp (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1998), 67–89.

Scriptural exposition of the spiritual and practical value of infant baptism for believers.[213] Listening to the voices of Calvin's appropriation in the Genevan context, the Reformed confessions and the baptismal forms, we notice, that the practice of baptism is embedded in a broad Biblical narrative of sacramental references: the visible elements of water, the sign of circumcision, God's historical acts of liberation, salvation and judgement in the history of Israel, as well as in the Person and work of Jesus and the practice of the Early Church.[214] For Calvin and the Reformed confessions, the use of visible signs is, first of all, needed because of our weakness and sinful condition, but the fact that God already used visible signs before the fall (tree of life; the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) indicates that the visible signs can also be interpreted more positively.

The research at hand has proved how important the relationship with the socio-religious context is for the appropriation of infant baptism and its relevance as a means of grace. Therefore the various baptismal narratives should preferably be designed by, or with, local theologians and then be discussed in intercultural conversations for mutual enrichment, evaluation and correction. Intercultural reading of the canonical Scriptures and the shared attention to the living God can play a critical and unifying role in the conversations.

At this point, I would like to mention a number of examples of the rich variety of Scripture that could be related to God's visible and tangible activity in infant baptism:

- accounts of the establishment of the covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15; Gen. 17);
- 'water and liberation narratives' in Genesis and Exodus — the flood in Noah's time (Gen. 6–9); the passage of Israel through the Red Sea (Ex. 13) and river Jordan (Josh. 3), the protective cloud in the desert (Ex. 13 and 1Cor. 10);
- sacramental texts from the Old Testament — the trees in paradise (Gen. 2 and 3), the rainbow (Gen. 9), the sign of the snake in the desert (Num. 21), the sprinkling with blood (Lev. 16) and sprinkling with water (Ezek. 36);
- Jesus' blessing of the children of the Covenant (Mark 10:13–16);
- baptismal narratives — Jesus' baptism (Mark 1), Jesus' institution of baptism (Mat. 28:19), baptism at Pentecost (Acts 2:39), the baptisms of the eunuch (Acts 8), Cornelius (Acts 10), Paul (Acts 9:17–18; Acts 22:16);
- references to the unity with Christ in baptism (Rom. 6:1–11; Gal. 3:27; Col. 2:11–15);
- references to the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to baptism (John 3:5; Titus 3:5–6);
- texts about washing and holiness (Lev. 14 and 16; Ezek. 36:25–27; Acts 22:16; 1Pt. 3:18–22);
- position of the children among God's people — the Abrahamic-Jewish context of circumcision and the Jewish feasts; the 'house texts', which can imply the baptism of children (Acts 16:15.33 and 18:8); the sanctification of children in the believing parent (1Cor. 7:14), the teaching of children in the church (Eph. 6:1–4);
- baptism as a sign of unity among believers (1Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:3-6).

Drawing on a broad spectre of Scriptural narratives and references could revive the appropriation of the richness of God's grace, care and presence in relation to infant baptism. It could also offer renewed Reformed narratives of baptism, with special attention to the position of children in the

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[213] For RPCI (North India) see § 3.7.1.1; for CCAP Nkhoma (Malawi) see § 4.5; for RCN (the Netherlands) see § 5.5.1. In the classical baptismal form, the first Scriptural references are also in defence of infant baptism: Gen. 17; Acts 2:38; Mark 10:13-16. In addition to this, there are also references to Noah and the Flood in Genesis, the drowning of Pharaoh in the Red Sea in the prayer and being buried and resurrected with Christ. Some newer Dutch baptismal forms add to this the institution of baptism in Mat. 28:19 and the relation between circumcision and baptism in Col. 2:11.12, as well as unity among believers (1Cor. 12:13). The RPCI form of infant baptism uses mainly the same references, but has as an addition: Ps. 103:17–18, which relates God's steadfast love upon the keeping of his commandments. The CCAP baptismal form focusses on forgiveness of sin and the reasons for infant baptism (Gen. 17; Acts 2:38; Mat. 19:14).

[214] E. A. De Boer, *John Calvin on the Visions of Ezekiel: Historical and Hermeneutical Studies in John Calvin's 'Sermons Inedits', especially on Ezek. 36-48* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 143f.; van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 199; 219f.

covenant, Christian family and church. Finally, the re-sourcing of infant baptism could also function in the commemoration of infant baptism as a pedagogical and liturgical practice in the congregation.[215]

7.7.4. Relevance of the Confessional Reformed Framework?

For a number of Reformed Christians, infant baptism today seems to relate especially to questions of protection, divine presence, agency and embodiment. These topics receive some attention in the Reformed confessions and baptismal forms, but of course in relation to a different context. It seems that professional theologians in the research contexts did not reflect much on the relationship between these questions and infant baptism. The Western missionaries to North India and Central Malawi used the confessional Reformed framework in their teaching and preaching of the Gospel. However, they were often unable to give a theological answer to the contextual questions posed by the Hindu context with its pantheon of deities[216] or the ATR spirit world, with witches and evil forces[217]. The fresh appropriations in the North Indian RPCI and the Central Malawian CCAP Nkhoma seem to touch upon this gap, but more theological reflection is needed.

The current Western Dutch context of modernity and secularization makes it difficult for believers to experience God's presence in daily life and this also affects the understanding of the sacraments. Wisse and Heeren observe: '*Disenchantment, the buffered self and mediational epistemology together distort reformational sacramentality…*'[218] Yet we have shown that a number of Dutch ordinary believers make a fresh appropriation of infant baptism by relating it to God's personal love and care in a 'desacralized' and secularizing world.[219]

These fresh appropriations, the relation to the Reformed confessions, as well as the questions ordinary believers have about this framework, require further intercultural reflection. Apart from the question of the relevance of the Reformed framework itself, the intercultural conversation also poses clear questions with regard to the development and continuous appropriation of a Reformed theology and practice of infant baptism: what does it mean for the Reformed theology and practice of infant baptism if children are not seen as 'born sinners', and if the meaning of Reformed infant baptism as a sign and seal of forgiveness and engrafting in Christ or the renewal through the Holy Spirit becomes obsolete? What would be the actual reference of the baptismal water, if it does not point to the cleansing of sin, sprinkling with the blood of Christ or the gift of the Holy Spirit? Is infant baptism still a 'sacrament', if it is merely a sign of our human witness and responsibility? Is infant baptism more than a 'wet child dedication', if parents don't believe that God is acting in infant baptism? What is the meaning of infant baptism, if it does not signify and seal a God-given transition from death to life in Christ, from being guilty to being holy, from being estranged from God to being incorporated in Christ (adoption)? Answering such questions is important for the future of the Reformed theology and practice of infant baptism but goes beyond the scope of this research.

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[215] In this section I am inspired by: Frieder Schulz, 'Das Taufgedächtnis in den Kirchen der Reformation: Anstöße zur Feier des Taufgedächtnisses' (1). *Quatember* 50, no. 2 (1986): 69–77 and Frieder Schulz, 'Das Taufgedächtnis in den Kirchen der Reformation' (2). *Quatember* 50, no. 3 (1986): 147–55.

[216] See § 3.7.5.5 and 3.7.7.1.

[217] See § 4.5.1.3, § 4.5.2.2 and § 4.5.2.3.

[218] Jelmer Heeren and Maarten Wisse, 'Reprioritizing the Lord's Supper among the Reformed', *Calvin Theological Journal* 54, no. 1 (April 2019): 98–99.

[219] See § 5.5.1.1, § 5.5.8 and § 5.5.9.2.

8. Lessons for Doing Reformed Theology Interculturally

In this final chapter I wish to bring the various lines of the research at hand together and to answer the main research question: *'What does the appropriation of infant baptism by Reformed believers in different contexts teach us about the possibilities and challenges for doing Reformed theology interculturally today?'*

Firstly, I wish to describe the lessons I personally gained from conducting this research, and especially from the intercultural conversation. There is a clear relationship between my personal learning and positionality[1] and the lessons we can draw from this research for the academic discipline of intercultural theology. In doing intercultural theology, the researcher is the subject of the research, a research instrument:[2] the reader looks at the research contexts through my eyes and I am also orchestrating the intercultural conversation. Therefore, describing my personal learning is important for understanding and evaluating how intercultural theology in this research is practised. Secondly, I believe that my personal development and involvement demonstrate the process and effect of doing intercultural theology: in a fruitful intercultural conversation, nobody remains unchanged, as the final goal of intercultural theology is, for me, that Christians gain mutual enrichment and transformation, as well as growth in knowledge of Christ (Eph. 3: 14–20). Thirdly, by making my positionality and learning explicit, I want to contribute to a broader understanding of the opportunities and pitfalls when doing intercultural theology. By describing my learning process, I wish to make transparent how I position myself as a researcher and a theologian in the empirical research and in the intercultural conversation.
Next, I will reflect on the hermeneutical and methodological lessons for doing intercultural theology, to be gained from this research. Here I reflect on the usefulness of the concept of appropriation and I look at the strong and weak sides of the research models I used for describing and analysing the field research.

8.1. Personal Lessons

In this section, I wish to describe and evaluate how the research and the intercultural conversation developed into a personal voyage of discovery, which shaped me as a researcher, a theologian and a Reformed Christian. This also meant answering the fifth sub-question: 'What can be learned from the intercultural conversation on infant baptism (as described in chapter seven) for doing Reformed theology interculturally today?'

8.1.1. Learning as a Researcher

In the first place, as a researcher, I knew from earlier intercultural experiences how important it is to be physically present in a research context. Coming to North India and Central Malawi was, at first, an overwhelming experience, due to the socio-cultural and religious differences. It was surprising to me that after some thirty interviews with pastors, teachers and ordinary believers in each research context, I gained a clear level of 'saturation' in the interviews. This gave me confidence that I would be able to ground my research sufficiently.[3]
Secondly, during the research, I gained more experience in interviewing, building a good rapport with respondents[4] and developing intercultural openness during the research. In this way, I was able

[1] See for an autobiographical introduction above § 1.11.1.
[2] See for an explanation § 1.11.2.
[3] For the term 'saturation' see Lisa M. Given (ed.), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods/Vols. 1 & 2.* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008), 195.
[4] See for the terminology: David L. Morgan and Heather Guevara, 'Rapport', in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008).

to react well to unexpected topics that were brought up by the respondents. I wanted the respondents to feel a real 'subject' in the conversation, not just an 'object' and that they were able to bring in topics and accents that were of importance to them.
Thirdly, I learned the value and limitations of the researcher as a research instrument. Naturally, being a white male teacher who does not speak the local languages causes limitations. This was true for the choice of the respondents, who were mainly English-speaking people. In the North Indian and Malawian context, that means that these were people with at least a high school education. Some respondents had difficulty expressing their thoughts effectively and I then had to rely on an interpreter. The fact that I was a male, white person caused a certain distance in the relationship with the respondents in North India and Malawi and I could not always be sure about the way in which respondents would prceive me (rich; representative of colonial powers…). However, I always took the time for mutual introductions and offered respondents the chance to speak freely about what was important to them in their daily lives, especially with regard to the Christian faith and the local church. On the other hand, in North India and Central Malawi being an outsider and foreigner also had the advantage that respondents were open to speaking frankly about their local situation. I also promised anonymity to all participants in the research. Being transparent about my position as a Reformed researcher and being part of the Reformed family, with which the respondents self-identify, usually resulted in an atmosphere of trust and confidence during the interviews. Especially in North India and Malawi, when having to introduce myself, the fact that I was also Reformed allowed respondents to trust me as a researcher.
This was confirmed afterwards by the local gatekeepers or interpreters, who recognized the results of the empirical research as, indeed, reflecting the local situations.
Fourthly, I conducted the field research in North India and Central Malawi first, which gave me the opportunity of listening to the Dutch RCN voices with the responses from RPCI North India and CCAP Nkhoma Malawi in mind. This made it easier for me to objectify my context and to see my Dutch respondents 'through the eyes of another'.[5] It also helped me to refrain from making the situation in my own context the 'lens' for the research in other contexts.
Last but not least, I learned that this type of field research depends to a large extent on the help and commitment of local gatekeepers and insider experts, who facilitated the research in many ways, contacted respondents, and also helped me to analyse and interpret the interviews and the observations. I was humbled by the way Reformed 'ordinary believers' in the research contexts were willing and ready to contribute to this project by entering into conversation with a white male theology teacher, sharing their beliefs with a stranger and expressing their convictions in a personal and existential way and also giving feedback on the first draft of relevant chapters of the thesis.

8.1.2. Learning as Theologian

As a Reformed theologian, I learned, first of all, how the espoused voices can reveal fresh appropriations of infant baptism, which are not expressed in the Reformed confessions or baptismal forms. Most important were, in this respect, the experiences of 'intensified divine presence'[6] (RPCI North India), the assurance of divine protection against witchcraft and evil forces (CCAP Nkhoma Malawi)[7] and the importance of embodiment and the testimony of the parents (Dutch RCN).[8] These local appropriations also helped me to discern comparable theological aspects of infant baptism in the other research contexts. This confirmed my conviction that listening to the espoused theological voices is indispensable for receiving a rich description of local theologies and practices. The local appropriations that become 'visible' in this way can also contribute to the global conversation on the Reformed practice of infant baptism.

[5] I borrowed this phrase from: De Wit et al., *Through The Eyes Of Another*.
[6] See for RPCI § 3.7.7.1; for CCAP Nkhoma § 4.5.7.1 and for RCN: § 5.5.1.1 and § 5.5.2.2.
[7] See § 4.5.2.2.
[8] See § 5.5.7.1 and § 5.5.8.

Secondly, the intercultural conversation helped me to look critically at my own appropriation of infant baptism, as mirrored in the initial sensitizing concepts and derived from my appropriation of classical Reformed theology[9] and to question my own appropriation in relation to the concepts of ordinary believers in various contexts. This was especially clear for the aspects of original sin and cleansing,[10] the lack of attention for the being engrafted and sanctified in Christ[11] and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.[12] This illustrates what Van den Toren states: 'All of our theology is being questioned in the mirror of the intercultural "other"'. [13]

Thirdly, in the intercultural conversation, I read the Reformed confessions and Calvin afresh, through the lens of the formal and espoused voices from the research contexts. This helped me to reflect on the roots of the Reformed family ('where do we come from') and to appreciate aspects in Calvin and the confessions to which I formerly paid little attention, such as the protection against evil forces and Satan,[14] the notion of 'adoption' as a child of God and the pastoral potential of the metaphor of the church as a 'mother', which are recurring thoughts in Calvin's baptismal theology and practice.[15] Reflection on Calvin's appropriation in Geneva and the Reformed confessions also helped me to reflect on current practices in the Reformed family ('where do we find ourselves today'), for example in the Central Malawian CCAP Nkhoma, the grandparents or elders sometimes taking responsibility for the baptism of little children and their upbringing in the faith. In the intercultural conversation it became clear that this was sometimes also practised in Calvin's Geneva and the Dutch ecclesiastical practice, too, acknowledges this possibility.[16] Reflecting on Calvin's appropriation in Geneva and the Reformed confessions also helped me to recognise the importance of infant baptism as a sign of entrance into the Christian community ('where do we go from here'). In the Indian RPCI and the Malawian CCAP context, this communal aspect was strongly present, even though it had different 'colours'.[17] In the Dutch individualistic context, this is often a neglected aspect of infant baptism, but the fact that parents see the congregation as a 'safe place' for their children might imply, that the communal aspect of infant baptism could receive a more substantial role.[18]

Fourthly, with regard to my position as an intercultural theologian, I learned, that the personal encounter with 'the other' was the most fruitful starting point for empirical research. Listening to the interviews and making observations, I tried to understand how the appropriations of individuals and representatives of communities were shaped. Next, I asked questions and made observations regarding the context in which they were theologizing and tried to discern the fabric and patterns of the appropriations in relation to the context, by asking: how does a specific appropriation make sense in the given context?

Finally, I researched and analysed my Dutch home context in the same manner as the other contexts and I reflected critically on my own context in light of the other contexts. I believe that certain aspects of a Reformed confessional understanding of infant baptism are more clearly present in the North Indian and Central Malawian contexts than in the Dutch context, for example, the reverence for God as the Almighty One[19], the attention for God's active presence in daily life,[20] the notion of

[9] See for an overview of the sensitizing concepts § 7.1.
[10] See § 7.3.3.5.
[11] See § 7.7.3.
[12] See § 7.7.2.
[13] van den Toren, 'Three-Way Conversation', 127.
[14] See § 7.5.3.1.
[15] See § 6.5.2, § 6.5.4 and § 6.5.5.
[16] See § 7.4.3.3 and § 7.4.3.4.
[17] For RPCI Nort India see § 3.7.3.2 and for CCAP Malawi see § 4.5.3.3.
[18] See § 5.5.4.
[19] See § 7.3.3.1.
[20] See § 7.3.3.3.

infant baptism as a boundary between believers and unbelievers[21]. This stimulates a future critical (re)consideration of the theology and practice of infant baptism for me and my home context.[22]

8.1.3. Learning as a Reformed Christian

I also learned from the research as a 'fellow Christian'. Firstly, the espoused voices show me how God can act and reveal Himself through infant baptism in, to me, unexpected and mysterious ways.[23] Ordinary believers talked about God's presence and activity in, and through, infant baptism in a context-sensitive way, which was not just interesting from a theological point of view, but also reinforced my trust in infant baptism as a means of grace in the Reformed tradition.
Secondly, the intercultural conversation displayed the diversity in the Reformed family and helped me to appreciate the experiences and theological expressions of the respondents in their 'otherness'. For example, during the field research in the RPCI in North India and the CCAP Nkhoma in Central Malawi, I encountered the belief that infant baptism signifies God's protection against evil spirits, witches or the influence of Hindu believers.[24] At first sight, this sounds strange to Dutch respondents, but it opened my eyes to the fact that in the Dutch RCN context as well, God's 'protection' as the heavenly Father of the child is not only promised in the baptismal form, but is also confessed in the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism: Christ 'has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven.'[25] Finally, through the intercultural conversation, I learned that Reformed believers in various contexts not only relate to God in different ways but also that God relates to believers in fresh 'incarnational' ways. This also stimulates me to further explore the possibilities of a spiritual '*convivencia*'[26] in the diverse and worldwide Reformed family.

8.2. Hermeneutical Lessons

In this and the next section, I will be addressing the main research question by reflecting on the hermeneutical lessons for doing intercultural theology, which can be gained from this research. I wish to reflect especially on the use of the concept of 'appropriation'.

8.2.1. The Process of Appropriation

As a working definition of appropriation, I formulated: 'Appropriation is the process in which ideas or practices from one context are received by humans or groups in another context through a process of conscious or unconscious selection and (re)construction'.[27]
The research shows that ordinary believers often appropriate the normative and formal Reformed theology in an eclectic way. The result of these appropriations is a theological 'bricolage',[28] in which elements from the Reformed confessions and baptismal forms and contextual aspects merge into fresh baptismal narratives, which make infant baptism a meaningful practice for ordinary believers. Some examples:

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[21] See § 7.4.3.5 and § 7.4.3.6.
[22] See J.J.A. Colijn, 'Hoe diep is het water van de doop?', *Theologia Reformata*, no. 2 (June 2022): 158–77.
[23] See § 7.6.3.1 and § 7.7.2.
[24] See § 7.5.3.1 and § 7.5.3.2.
[25] Canadian Reformed Churches, *Book of Praise*, 474.
[26] See § 2.1.1. for a definition of this term.
[27] See § 2.1.
[28] See for the terminology: Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 513; Marcel Barnard, 'Bricolageliturgie. Liturgical Studies Revisited', in *God in een kantelende wereld: geloof en kerk in veranderende contexten*, eds F. Gerrit Immink and Cas J.A. Vos (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum Uitgevers, 2009), 310–25.

* (over-)accentuating certain aspects: baptism is, in all research contexts and the Reformed confessions, related to being a 'child of God'.[29] However, in the Dutch RCN, this aspect receives so much attention that it leaves little room for other aspects of infant baptism (forgiveness or washing of sin, union with Christ).[30]
* re-interpreting theological ideas from the Reformed tradition and confessions: while God's 'covenant' is referred to regularly in the research contexts, it does not indicate God's initiative of adopting a child as his own and receiving it into the community of the covenant, but rather, it is perceived as establishing a personal relationship between God and the child, in which the parents take the initiative.[31] This can result in an understanding of infant baptism that is close to 'child dedication' and leaves little to no space for God's agency in baptism.
* neglecting aspects of baptismal theology which are essential in the Reformed confessions and baptismal forms, such as original sin,[32] or baptism as being engrafted in the death and resurrection of Christ.[33] Sometimes these aspects are doubted or denied, but often they just seem to have lost their relevance for ordinary believers and do not play a role in their spiritual appropriation of infant baptism.

Finally, listening to the voices of Christians from different contexts in an intercultural conversation revealed fresh appropriations, which probably would have remained 'undiscovered' in a single case study.[34] For example:
* The aspect of divine activity and presence in infant baptism surfaced in the interviews with RPCI members in North India and later also among CCAP Nkhoma respondents in Central Malawi. It then became clear to me that Dutch parents, too, speak about God's divine presence at infant baptism, but they do so from their own perspective in a secularizing context.[35]
* The idea of baptismal protection is, in a general way, present in the classical baptismal form but received concrete appropriations in the various contexts: protection against Hindu threats and evil people (RPCI), protection against witches and evil forces (CCAP) and protection against the attraction and threat of a secular context.[36]
* Respondents from the North Indian RPCI mention that, in the event of conversion to Christianity, relationships with the Hindu family are often broken. In such difficult situations, infant baptism becomes an important sign and seal of belonging to the community of the church as a 'new family'. It demonstrates the significance of being children of the Christian God, who is powerful to safeguard and protect His elected children, even in times of oppression.[37] In this context of oppression, it also functions for the church as a testimony of faithfulness, belonging and dedication from the side of the believer. These aspects add a fresh dimension to the expression 'children of God', which is also observed in the other research contexts.
* In the Central Malawian CCAP Nkhoma, the ATR idea of '*umunthu*' is (explicitly or implicitly) re-interpreted ('baptized') by pastors and believers to transform traditional communities into Christian communities. In this context, infant baptism functions as a protective sign of belonging to the Christian God and the Christian family and an assurance that God will keep the child from evil and sinful behaviour.[38] This appropriation can also shed light on the meaning of 'belonging' in other contexts.

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[29] See § 7.3.3.1.
[30] See § 5.5.1.1 and § 5.5.2.2.
[31] See § 7.4.3.1.
[32] See § 7.3.3.5.
[33] See § 7.4.3.3.
[34] van den Toren, 'Three-Way Conversation', 3; See also: Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*; Cortez, 'Creation and Context', 13; Bom and van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity*, 165.
[35] See § 7.6.3.1 and 7.6.3.2.
[36] See § 7.3.3.3.
[37] See § 3.7.3.2.
[38] See § 4.5.4.

* In the Dutch RCN, the attention for embodiment and authenticity stimulates parents to give their testimony during the baptismal service and to sometimes publicly make promises to their child. In this way, the role of the parents in infant baptism is accentuated, which can also function as a testimony for non-Christian or non-Reformed visitors of the baptismal service.[39] This appropriation might also help respondents in the other research contexts to reflect on the responsibility of the parents in infant baptism.
* The desire of some parents to ask for infant baptism by immersion is well-known in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, but it is a new appropriation in the Dutch RCN context.

The question is whether these are indeed appropriations that enable a Christ-centred transformation in and of the context, or that certain appropriations need correction in the light of the canonical Scriptures and the Reformed theological framework. This should first of all be considered and decided by local theologians and churches, but it could also be a theme of intercultural conversations in the Reformed family. In this way, theological insularity can be balanced out or corrected.[40]

8.2.2. Appropriations — Infant Baptism Embedded and Embodied

In this research, 'appropriation' serves as a heuristic concept, to discern and understand how elements from Reformed theology are 'used' by believers, in order to make it their own. The research demonstrates that Reformed infant baptism does not exist in an abstract sense or as a 'pure' Reformed sacrament, but always as an appropriated practice, which is embedded and embodied in concrete socio-religious contexts and life situations.[41] To mention some examples:
* RPCI (North India)
The marginal position of Christians in the North Indian context as well as the Hindu worldview is reflected in the appropriation of infant baptism as protection against evil people and Hindu threats.[42] The postponement of infant baptism seems to be motivated by the Evangelical-Pentecostal pressure for re-baptism. The strong accent on sprinkling is motivated by the desire to self-identify as Reformed Christians over and against Evangelical-Pentecostals but also means to keep a distance from Hindu ritual practices and to avoid offence through baptism in public water.[43]
* CCAP Nkhoma (Malawi)
The socio-religious context and the ATR worldview in Central Malawi, as well as the economic situation and gender roles, influence the practice of infant baptism. This becomes visible in the absence of the fathers at baptism, the inconsequent practice of infant baptism[44] and the religious hybridity (participation in both ATR and Christian practices).[45] The understanding of infant baptism as protection against evil forces and witchcraft also shows the relation to the ATR worldview.[46]
* RCN (Netherlands)
The influence of the secular and individualistic Dutch context is reflected in the strong accent on God's love and his daily care for the child[47] and the importance of the public testimony of the parents, in which they express their faith and trust in God as Father in a context which is often experienced as hostile to Christian values and upbringing.[48]

[39] See § 5.5.7.1, § 5.5.9.3 and § 7.5.3.2.
[40] See § 2.4.5.
[41] See for reflections on this idea: Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, ch. 4.
[42] See § 3.7.7.1.
[43] See § 3.7.5.2.
[44] See § 4.5.5.2.
[45] See § 4.5.2.3.
[46] See § 4.5.7.1.
[47] See § 5.5.1.1.
[48] See § 5.5.4 and § 5.5.8.

These examples demonstrate, how Reformed believers appropriate infant baptism and, in this way, relate it to the questions of their hearts and the situation of their daily lives.

8.3. Methodological and Practical Lessons

Finally, I would like to offer some reflections on the methodological and practical lessons from this research, which can contribute to future intercultural theological research. I will pay attention to the use of the BBBE model, the Four Voices model and the practice of the intercultural conversation.

8.3.1. Listening to Four Voices of Theology

While doing research as a Westerner in North India and Central Malawi (and, to a lesser extent, in my Dutch context), it became clear that using the adapted Four Voices model has not only practical but also hermeneutical implications, as the research population is approached in a specific way from the outset.[49] Some practical considerations:

Firstly, for the researcher, the most valuable contribution of the Four Voices model is that it creates a structural place for the 'soft' espoused voice and appreciates the theological contribution of non-trained theologians.[50] In our research, this also functions as a certain empowerment for ordinary believers.[51] The research shows that the espoused voice of theology is indispensable for mapping and understanding the appropriation of infant baptism, especially because of its embeddedness in the socio-religious context. For example, discovering that several ordinary believers experienced a personal encounter with the living God at infant baptism was only possible by listening to the espoused voice.[52] In addition, the fact that the sign of the baptismal water itself has so little impact on ordinary believers became clear as a result of the use of this model.[53]

Secondly, the model shows that differences between the various theological voices in a specific context may be diverse or even dissociated and also that this is not always noticed by the representatives of the various voices. This is, for example, the case with the notion of divine agency in infant baptism,[54] but also with respect to the variety of opinions regarding original sin or baptism as a sign of washing with the blood of Christ.[55]

Thirdly, the use of the Four Voices model could influence or change the relationship between pastors and congregation members, especially in contexts where listening to the theological voice of ordinary believers is not, or is less, common. Attention to espoused theology may, at first, be surprising, or even problematic for some trained theologians, as they could perceive it as a threat to their position or a weakening of their authority. The goal of my research was not to change any existing practice or conviction and therefore I respected the existing situation in each context.

Fourthly, the distinctions between the theological voices were sometimes blurred. For instance, trained theologians did not only represent the formal voice but also the normative voice and they also gave their personal opinions (espoused voice). The espoused theology of ordinary believers is not really separate, as it draws (perhaps in an intuitive way) on the normative voice of Scripture and the Reformed confessions, as well as on the formal voices from sermons, catechesis or literature.[56]

Finally, the use of the Four Voices model could create an artificial dichotomy between pastors and congregation members and could lead to a 'framing' of the respondents. For example, pastors and gatekeepers sometimes indicated that ordinary believers have little theological knowledge and therefore they might come up with strange, deficient or wrong ideas about infant baptism.

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[49] Some of the structural limitations of the Four Voices-model have already been addressed in § 2.3.6.

[50] Cf. Cameron, Bhatti, and Duce, *Talking about God*, 56. See for the use of the model in intercultural theology: Bom and van den Toren, *Context and Catholicity*, 21f.

[51] See § 3.6.4; § 4.4.2; § 7.3.3.3.

[52] See § 7.6.3.1.

[53] See § 7.5.3.1.

[54] See § 7.5.3.1.

[55] See § 7.3.3.5.

[56] Cameron, Bhatti, and Duce, *Talking about God*, 53.

However, the research showed, not only that ordinary believers are able to reflect intellectually on the meaning and practice of infant baptism, but also showed the importance of other theological aspects to infant baptism than intellectual knowledge. This became clear, for example, in the strong accent on belonging and protection in the North Indian RPCI and the aspect of experiencing relief because of God's protection in the CCAP Nkhoma, which surfaced first of all in the interviews with ordinary believers.[57] Conversations on these various aspects between pastors and congregation members in and beyond a given research context could be edifying and fruitful for all participants.

8.3.2. Mapping Appropriation: BBBE model

With respect to the BBBE model,[58] the research shows, firstly, that it operationalises the hermeneutical concept of 'appropriation' in a useful way. The model served well to design the interview questions and structure the actual interviews and map the various appropriations of infant baptism in each of the research contexts in a systematic way. For each of the aspects, I formulated sensitizing concepts which guided the explorative journey of the field research.[59] These sensitizing concepts show my initial appropriation of infant baptism, which was based on my positionality as a Dutch researcher, theologian and Christian. In the research practice, I paid attention to the specific meaning of each of the BBBE aspects in, and for, a specific context and I defined the use of the aspects in the various contexts, as far as relevant.[60] With the help of the BBBE model, the use of the sensitizing concepts could also be traced per context, which leads to a better understanding of the sensitizing concepts in various contexts. This is true, for instance, for the different ways in which the concept of the 'covenant' is used,[61] how the expression 'child of God' functions,[62] how the idea of 'protection' is appropriated,[63] or how the experience of divine presence emerges in various contexts.[64]

Secondly, the 'lens' of the BBBE model proved to be wide enough to also pick up elements of infant baptism that go beyond the theology of the Reformed confessions or baptismal forms, which I had not identified from the outset. In this way, I discovered several fresh sensitizing concepts. For example, that sin is understood not just as personal guilt, but also as a cosmic force (Satan and evil powers fighting for the soul of the child among parents of the CCAP Nkhoma),[65] attention not just for God's performative acting in baptism through the pastor, but also for God's intensified presence at infant baptism ('touched by the Sacred One'),[66] the possibility for CCAP Nkhoma grandparents and elders to bring a child to baptism,[67] the delay of infant baptism in the RPCI in North India so that the child might have a memory of his baptism[68] and the witness of the parents during the baptismal service and the attention for the mode of baptism ('immersion') in the Dutch RCN.[69]

Thirdly, the BBBE model also functions well in combination with the Four Voices model and enables tracking down the different appropriations of the formal and the espoused voices of theology or the differences between ordinary believers in one context.[70]

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[57] See § 4.5 and F-29:2; teacher; 30+

[58] See § 2.2.1 for the description and references to literature.

[59] See § 7.1.

[60] See e.g. § 3.7.2; § 3.7.4 (RPCI North India); § 4.5.4 (CCAP Nkhoma Central Malawi); § 5.5.2.1; § 5.5.8 (RCN Netherlands).

[61] See § 7.4.3.1.

[62] See § 7.3.3.1.

[63] See § 7.3.3.3.

[64] See § 7.6.3.1.

[65] See § 7.5.3.1.

[66] See § 7.6.3.1 and § 7.6.3.2.

[67] See § 4.5.5.1 and § 4.5.5.2.

[68] See § 3.7.5.2.

[69] See § 5.5.5.2 and § 5.5.6.

[70] See § 7.3.3 (protection), § 7.3.3.5 (original sin) and § 7.5.3.1 (divine agency in baptism).

Fourthly, because in the practice of the analysis the four aspects of the BBBE model could not always be neatly separated, as well as there being a certain overlap between the aspects, several sensitizing concepts had elements which could be related to more than one of the four aspects. For example, 'protection' has an element of believing in God's presence, but it also has the element of God's active agency and parents also related it to the experience of God's divine presence in the baptismal liturgy.[71] However, by analysing the mutual relationships between the BBBE aspects and by bringing the four aspects together into a coherent baptismal narrative for each of the research contexts, not only were the conceptual limitations of the BBBE model addressed, but also a higher level of integration achieved.
In short: the BBBE model is a useful tool in the practice of doing intercultural theological research, but it has limitations when used in the analysis.

8.3.3. Limitations

The present research is based on limited fieldwork. In total, I spent about a month in North India (three visits) and three weeks in Malawi (two visits). During these periods I had numerous informal conversations, visited places, people and churches and, in each context, I conducted around thirty in-depth interviews with individuals, as well as some group interviews. However, as indicated from the outset (§ 2.3.4), these periods are too short to do participant research or to map the 'operant voice' sufficiently. One could ask, for example: how does infant baptism function as a boundary marker for Reformed Christians on the one hand and non-Christians or Evangelical-Pentecostal believers on the other hand in the context of the North Indian RPCI? Or: to what extent do ordinary believers in the CCAP Nkhoma experience infant baptism as a 'magical' rite? What could be the reasons, that in the CCAP Nkhoma the water-ritual itself does not seem to really affect the believers? How is the 'delayed effectivity' of infant baptism experienced and lived out in the lives of baptized children in the various contexts?
There are also other questions to be asked, such as: to what extent is mutual learning in the Reformed family realistic and feasible? For example: could Dutch Reformed believers, living in a context with strong processes of individualization, indeed learn from the more communal approach to infant baptism in the CCAP Nkhoma or the RPCI in North India, as suggested by some of the Dutch gate-keepers? And if so, how could this be facilitated? Would there be openness among individualist Dutch Reformed believers to learn from more communal societies and vice versa? Or is the cultural distance between the various contexts simply too wide for '*convivencia*' in the Reformed family? To answer such questions, a more extensive participatory research should be conveyed. In addition to this, more extensive and intensive involvement of ordinary believers and trained theologians from the research contexts would be required. However, this exceeds the limits of this research.

8.4. Intercultural Conversation

Finally, I wish to reflect on the intercultural conversation as a means to valorise and integrate the results from field research. I will be paying attention to the conditions of such a conversation and reflect on the conversation as a practice of Reformed encounter and '*convivencia*'.

8.4.1. Meeting the Other

For a fruitful meeting of 'the other', all participants (including the researcher) have to leave their comfort zone and meet in a 'dialectic of distanciation and appropriation' (Ricoeur).[72] In the words of Sundermeier: 'on the one hand letting the stranger stand in his or her otherness, and on the other hand coming close enough to the stranger that a relationship is possible, which is neither possessive

[71] Compare § 7.3.3.1, § 7.5.3.1 and § 7.6.3.1.
[72] See for my use of Ricoeur § 2.1.1.

nor dismissive and is able to combine distance with nearness'.[73] In the research at hand, it has been demonstrated that this requires:
- the appreciation of the (creational) gift of 'otherness' and 'difference' in the intercultural conversation;[74]
- an open attitude for opportunities for mutual enrichment and broadening of our theological horizon;[75]
- the recognition of the value of paying equal attention to a diversity of theological voices, including the voices of those who are often deemed 'weak' (less literate; little formal education), as these espoused voices showed creative ways to relate infant baptism to the concrete circumstances of the believers;[76]
- room for everyone to bring up topics that are important to them, even though these topics might, at first sight, not fit into the classical Reformed framework. This avoids epistemic violence and the hegemony of a Western or elite academic perspective. In the research, this resulted, for example, in attention to '*umunthu*' in relation to infant baptism in the CCAP Nkhoma[77] and it showed the hesitation for a very early baptism in the North Indian RPCI;[78]
- the importance of 'otherness' in the research and in the intercultural conversation was referred to in an open way by the respondents and the researcher.[79]

The starting point of this intercultural theological research is appreciating 'otherness' and 'difference' as creational gifts and opportunities for mutual enrichment and broadening of our theological horizon. By meeting 'the other' in this way, the inclusion of 'all the saints' becomes fruitful for doing Reformed theology interculturally, can shed light on the appropriation of a multi-layered topic such as of infant baptism, can stimulate further intercultural exploration and can also lead to mutual enrichment in the Reformed family.
The historical voice from Calvin in Geneva makes the participants in the intercultural conversation aware of the sensitivities of the past and also stimulates them to reflect on the historical question of where we come from as a Reformed family and what is part of our DNA. It also shows 'as in a mirror', where we find ourselves today as members of this Reformed family, which family traits are still topical, and what has faded out over time. This also stimulates us to reflect on who we want to be as Reformed family in the future. The metaphor of the 'Reformed family' allows for a search for unity as well as for diversity, corresponding to the variety of contexts in which the Reformed family functions. In this way, the '*semper reformanda'* principle receives a diachronic as well as a geographic dimension.

8.3.4. Together with All the Saints

Van den Toren understands doing intercultural theology as a 'three-way conversation', which is 'characterized by joint attention to God', who reveals Himself in the canonical Scriptures and in Jesus Christ and brings conversation partners together.[80] In line with this, the goal of an intercultural theological conversation is not only to gain a deeper mutual understanding, but also to 'comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge' (Eph. 3:18-19).[81] This provides the basis for a spiritual encounter and '*convivencia*' in the Reformed family.

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[73] Sundermeier, *Mission - Geschenk der Freiheit*, 83.
[74] See for a methodological explanation § 2.1.1.
[75] See § 7.3.3.1 and § 7.3.3.2, as well as my own learning in § 8.1.
[76] See for example § 7.3.3.3 (protection) and § 7.5.3.1 (divine agency).
[77] See § 7.4.3.5.
[78] See § 3.7.5.2.
[79] See for the methodological explanation § 2.1.1.
[80] van den Toren, 'Three-Way Conversation', 123.
[81] See § 2.4.3.

The research showed that an intercultural conversation as a way of doing intercultural theology can serve the '*convivencia*' of ordinary believers, trained theologians and churches in the worldwide Reformed family:
- shared attention to God can enrich our appropriation of infant baptism for example as: a means of God's protective grace in spiritual threats,[82] living out a baptismal identity in various contexts[83], and deepening our understanding of what it means to be a child of God.[84] The mentioning of intensified divine presence also illustrates how God's agency as the Sacred One is experienced in the research contexts;[85]
- fresh appropriations are recognized by gatekeepers, who read the description and analysis of my research, and several insider experts also recognized fresh appropriations from other contexts as leading to a renewed understanding of God's presence and work in this world, for example, the communal aspect of '*umunthu*' (CCAP Nkhoma), the church as a Christian family (RPCI) or addressing God as Father (RCN). In this way, these appropriations contribute to an enrichment of the theology and practice of the Reformed rite of infant baptism in the worldwide Reformed family.
This could also stimulate further reflection on appropriations of infant baptism in the other contexts:
- in the intercultural conversation the Reformed principle '*ecclesia reformata quia semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*'[86] is put to the test. There are various 'fresh appropriations' that demand attention and further discussions, such as the experience of divine protection from evil spirits, witchcraft, attraction from other religions or the threat of secularism[87]; the delay of baptizing children by parents in the North Indian RPCI;[88] the inconsistent practice of infant baptism in the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma, where usually only the mothers are present[89]; the interest in the mode of baptism and the place of the witness of the parents in the Dutch RCN.[90] If and how such appropriations fit into the Reformed theological framework need to be decided in the first place by local theologians and can also be the subject of further intercultural conversations. However, in the '*convivencia*' of the worldwide Reformed family, there should also be space for complementary and various mutually enriching appropriations of the Gospel. This is in accordance with the diversity that has characterized the Reformed tradition from the 16th century on.[91]
The intercultural conversation shows the value of doing theology together in a globalizing world and the need for faithful appropriations of the Gospel, which are Biblically grounded and offer true knowledge of God in Christ, relating the Gospel to issues of the heart, life situations and existential questions of believers in their socio-cultural context. In the words of Walls: 'None of us can reach Christ's completeness on our own. We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge and focus our own; only together we are complete in Christ.'[92]

[82] See § 7.3.3.3.
[83] See § 7.4.3.5.
[84] See § 7.3.3.1.
[85] See for RPCI § 3.7.7.1; for CCAP Nkhoma § 4.5.7.1 and for RCN: § 5.5.1.1 and § 5.5.2.2.
[86] See § 1.6. for an explanation of this phrase.
[87] See § 7.4.3.1. and § 7.6.3.1.
[88] See § 3.7.5.2.
[89] See § 4.5.6.4.
[90] See § 5.5.7.1.
[91] van den Brink and Smits, 'Reformed Stance', 335.
[92] Walls, 'Ephesian Moment', 79.

Appendix 1 – Interview Questions

Most interviews started with some questionnaire questions (marital status, children, work etc.). The main interview was done in a semi-structured format, guided by the BBBE model. The main questions were always followed by minor questions, to receive more information or clarification. The questions for pastors and teachers covered mainly the same topic as the questions for ordinary believers. In addition, I also had a list of more informative questions for the pastors.

Semi-structured interview questions for ordinary believers, pastors and teachers
The questions were the same for all respondents, but for pastors and teachers the questions were slightly re-phrased:

- what would congregation members/people in your context say about…
- what do you yourself think about…

I. Introduction
The goal of these questions is 'warming up', but also understanding, which topics are important for the respondent:
- can you tell me something about your family?
- could you tell me something about your youth and becoming a Christian?
- can you tell me something about what it means for you to be a Christian?
- what is your experience with infant baptism (were you baptized as a child, were your children baptized)?

II. Infant Baptism
Introduction
- were your children baptized as infants? Why (not)?
- how important is it for you, that your child is (not) baptized?

1. Questions about Believing
- what do you think happens in baptism?
- who is acting in baptism? do you think baptism is mainly about our action as parents, or church, or is God acting in baptism, or….?
- is there a relation between salvation and baptism?
- difficult question: what does it mean when a child dies in infancy without being baptized?

2. Questions about Belonging
- what does baptism mean for the relationship of the parents and the child with God?
- what does baptism mean for the relation of the parents and the child with the church/family
- what does baptism mean for relationship of the parents and the child with society?
- which of these relations is the most important and why?

3. Questions about Behaving
- what can you tell about the preparation for infant baptism?
- what can you tell about what happens during the baptismal service?
- does infant baptism influence the way in which you raise your child? If so, how?

4. Questions about Experiencing
- how did you feel during the baptism / after the baptism of your child or children?
- do you think God was present in baptism? If so, could you tell me something about that?

Appendix 2 – Review Questions to Gatekeepers and Specialists

1. CONTEXT DESCRIPTION
* What are the most surprising (or disturbing) things for you in the description of the xxx context?
* Could you explain why it is surprising (or disturbing) for you?

* What are things in the description of the xxx context which you do not recognize or are missing?
* Could you explain what you don't recognize or what is missing?

2. INTERVIEW DATA
* What was unexpected or new in the description of the interviews?
* Could you explain why?

* What are things in the description of the interviews which you do not recognize or agree with?
* Could you explain why?

* What are things in the analysis of the interviews which you do not agree with?
* How would you interpret these data instead?

3. LESSONS from the research
What are lessons from this research for the theology and practice of Infant Baptism in your church?

4. Other questions and remarks
Do you have any additional remarks/questions on the interviews or the analysis?

Appendix 3 – Data-files

Interviews RPCI North India
F-8: India 1 – 17 April 2016 – Pastor 1 (40+)
F-9: India 1 – 20 April 2016 – Teacher 1 (30+)
F-10: India 1 – 21 April 2016 – Teacher 2 (40+)
F-11: India 1 – 22 April 2016 – Teacher 3 (30+)
F-12: India 1 – 22 April 2016 – Teacher 4 (40+)
F-13: India 1 – 24 April 2016 – Teacher 5 (30+)
F-14: India 2 – 15 July 2017 – Teacher 3 (30+)
Gr-15: India 2 – 15 July 2017 – Group interview
F-16: India 2 – 16 July 2017 – Pastor 1 (40+)
E-17: India 2 – 17 July 2017 – Mother 1 (20+)
E-18: India 2 – 17 July 2017 – Father 1 (30+)
E-19: India 2 – 18 July 2017 – Mother 2 (20+)
E-20: India 2 – 19 July 2017 – Mother 3 (35+)
E-21: India 2 – 19 July 2017 – Father 2 (20+)
E-22: India 2 – 19 July 2017 – Father 3 (20+)
E-23: India 2 – 20 July 2017 – Father 4 (20+)
E-24: India 2 – 20 July 2017 – Father 5 (20+)
E-25: India 2 – 20 July 2017 – Mother 4 (20+)
E-26: India 2 – 21 July 2017 – Mother 5 (40+)
E-27: India 2 – 22 July 2017 – Father 6 (40+)
E-28: India 2 – 22 July 2017 – Pastor 2 (30+)
F-29: India 3 – 23 Feb. 2019 – Teacher 1 (30+)

F-30: India 3 – 23 Feb. 2019 – Teacher 2 (30+)
E-31: India 3 – 03 March 2019 – Mother 1 (20+)
E-32: India 3 – 03 March 2019 – Mother 2 (20+)
E-33: India 3 – 03 March 2019 – Father 1 (20+)
E-34: India 3 – 03 March 2019 – Mother 3 (20+)
E-35: India 3 – 03 March 2019 – Mother & Father (20+)

Interviews CCAP Central Malawi
D 36: Malawi – Book of Liturgy & Baptism (28)
D 37: Malawi – DAISON RESEARCH PAPER Lord's Supper
F-38: Malawi 1 – 14 Feb. 2018 – teacher 1 (40+)
F-39: Malawi 1 – 16 Feb. 2018 – chaplain (30+)
F-40: Malawi 1 – 16 Feb. 2018 – reverend 1 (50+)
F-41: Malawi 1 – 16 February 2018 – teacher 2 (40+)
F-42: Malawi 1 – 18 February 2018 – reverend 2 (50+)
F-43: Malawi 1 – 18 February 2018 – teacher 3 (40+)
F-44: Malawi 1 – 20 February 2018 – reverend 3 (40+)
F-45: Malawi 1 – 20 February 2018 – reverend 4 (60+)
F-46: Malawi 1 – 20 February 2018 – reverend 5 (50+)
F-47: Malawi 1 – 21 February 2018 – reverend 6 (30+)
F-48: Malawi 1 – 21 February 2018 – teacher 4 (40+)
E-49: Malawi 1 – 22 February 2018 – student couple 1 (20+)
E-50: Malawi 1 – 22 February 2018 – student couple 2 (20+)
E-51: Malawi 1 – 23 February 2018 – student couple 3 (20+)
E-52: Malawi 2 – 15 July 2018 – Father 1– 1 (20+)
E-53: Malawi 2 – 15 July 2018 Father 2 (30+)
E-54: Malawi 2 – 16 July 2018 Father 5 (40+)
E-55: Malawi 2 – 16 July 2018 Father 6 (30+)
E-56: Malawi 2 – 16 July 2018 Father 7 (30+)
E-57: Malawi 2 – 18 July 2018 Father 8 (30+)
E-58: Malawi 2 – 18 July 2018 Father 9 (40+)
D 59: Malawi 2 – Field Notes July 2018
E-60: Malawi 2 – 15 July 2018 Mother 1–1 (20+)
E-61: Malawi 2 – 15 July 2018 Mother 1–2 (20+)
E-62: Malawi 2 – 15 July 2018 – Mother3 (20+)
E-63: Malawi 2 – 15 July 2018 – Mother 4 (20+)
E-64: Malawi 2 – 16 July 2018 – Mother 5 (40+)
E-65: Malawi 2 – 16 July 2018 – Mother 6 (30+)
E-66: Malawi 2 – 18 July 2018 – Mother 8 (30+)
E-67: Malawi 2 – 18 July 2018 – Mother 9 (40+)
E-68: Malawi 2 – 20 July 2018 – Mother 12 (30+)
E-69: Malawi 2 – 20 July 2018 – Father 10 (30+)
E-70: Malawi 2 – 20 July 2018 – Father 11 (20+)
D-146: India 3 – Field notes
Gr-147: Malawi 2 – 20 July 2018 – Group interview
E-148: Malawi 2 – 20 July 2018 – Mother 10 (20+)
E-149: Malawi 2 – 20 July 2018 – Mother 11 (20+)
Gr-161: Malawi 2 – 21 July 2018 – Group interview

Interviews The Netherlands
E-158: Netherlands1 – 22 October 2019 - Father 1 (20+)

E-159: Netherlands1 – 22 October 2019 – Mother 1 (20+
E-160: Netherlands1 – 23 October 2019 – Father 2 (30+)
E-161: Netherlands1 – 23 October 2019 – Mother 2 (30+)
E-162: Netherlands1 – 24 October 2019 – Mother 3 (30+)
E-163: Netherlands1 – 24 October 2019 – Father 3 (30+)
F-164: Netherlands1 – 29 October 2019 – Deacon1 (40+)
F-165: Netherlands1 – 01 November 2019 – Pastor 1 (60+)
F-166: Netherlands1 – 01 November 2019 – Elder 1 (40+)
E-167: Netherlands2 – 05 November 2019 - Mother 4 (30+)
E-168: Netherlands2 – 05 November 2019 – Father 4 (30+)
E-169: Netherlands2 – 08 November 2019 – Mother 5 (30+)
E-170: Netherlands2 – 08 November 2019 – Father 5 (30+)
E-171: Netherlands2 – 13 November 2019 – Mother 6 (30+)
E-172: Netherlands2 – 13 November 2019 – Father 6 (30+)
E-173: Netherlands2 – 14 November 2019 – Father 7 (30+)
E-174: Netherlands2 – 14 November 2019 – Mother 7 (30+)
F-175: Netherlands2 – 15 November 2019 – Deacon 2 (30+)
F-176: Netherlands2 – 15 November 2019 – Elder 2 (40+)
E-177: Netherlands3 – 11 December 2019 – Mother 8 (30+)
F-178: Netherlands3 – 11 December 2019 – Pastor 3 (30+)
E-179: Netherlands3 – 11 December 2019 – Father 9 (30+)
E-180: Netherlands3 – 11 December 2019 – Mother 9 (30+)
E-181: Netherlands3 – 12 December 2019 – Mother 10 (20+)
E-182: Netherlands3 – 12 December 2019 – Father 10 (20+)
E-183: Netherlands3 – 17 January 2020 – Mother 11 (30+)
E-184: Netherlands3 – 17 January 2020 – Father 11 (30+)
E-185: Netherlands1 – baptismal witness parents
E-186: Netherlands1 – baptismal witness parents
E-187: Netherlands1 – baptismal witness parents
E-189: Netherlands2 – 12 December 2019 – Pastor (50+)

Documents
D-190: Baptismal Form – RCN-1-2016
D-191: Baptismal Form – RCN-2-2016
D-192: Baptismal Form – RCN-3-2016
D-193: Baptismal Form – RCN-classical
D-194: Chacko – Asian Catechism
D-195: Baptismal Form – RPCI (concept)
D-196: Calvin – Specialist – SC1
D-197: Calvin – Specialist – SC2
D-198: India – Gatekeeper – GI1
D-199: India – Gatekeeper – GI2
D-200: India – Gatekeeper – GI3
D-201: India – Gatekeeper – GK2Nl
D-202: India – Gatekeeper – GK1Nl
D-203: Malawi – Gatekeeper – GK1Nl
D-204: India – Specialist – SI1
D-205: Malawi – Gatekeeper - GK2Nl
D-206: Malawi – Specialist – SM1
D-207: Malawi – Specialist – SM2
D-208: Netherlands – Gatekeeper – GK1Nl

D-209: Netherlands – Gatekeeper – GK2Nl
D-210: Netherlands – Specialist – SNl1
D-212: Malawi – Gatekeeper – GM2
D-213: Malawi – Specialist – S3Nl

Samenvatting

Hoe diep is het water van de doop?
Kinderdoop als een case study van het intercultureel beoefenen van gereformeerd theologie

1. Inleiding

Sinds de Reformatie in de zestiende eeuw zwermen christenen die zichzelf 'gereformeerd' of - in de Angelsaksische wereld - 'presbyteriaans' noemen vanuit West-Europa uit in alle windrichtingen. Een vraag die mij al lang boeit is: wat betekent het voor christenen uit heel verschillende contexten om deel uit te maken van de 'Worldwide Reformed Family'? Hoe krijgt de gereformeerde traditie waarmee zij zich identificeren vorm en betekenis in al die verschillende en veranderende sociaal-religieuze contexten? Een bekend gereformeerd adagium is, dat de gereformeerde kerk ook steeds opnieuw ge-reformeerd moet worden: *'Ecclesia reformata quia semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei'*. Maar hoe maken christenen in niet-Westerse en Westerse contexten zich die gereformeerde theologie en traditie vandaag eigen? Wat kunnen gereformeerde christenen uit verschillende contexten van elkaar leren? Wat zou een intercultureel theologisch gesprek binnen de gereformeerde familie kunnen opleveren en hoe zou zo'n conversatie kunnen worden opgezet? In dit onderzoeksproject wil ik deze vragen exploreren en een eerste aanzet geven voor een antwoord. Om het onderzoek af te bakenen concentreer ik me op de kinderdoop in de gereformeerde familie als een 'case study'. Ik heb kwalitatief empirisch onderzoek gedaan bij leden van gereformeerd-presbyteriaanse kerken in drie contexten: Noord-India, Centraal Malawi en Nederland. Allereerst onderzoek en analyseer ik, hoe de toe-eigening van de kinderdoop bij gereformeerden in deze contexten concreet gestalte krijgt. Vervolgens beschrijf ik hoe Calvijn in het Genève van zijn dagen de theologie en praktijk van de kinderdoop toe-eigende voor zijn context. De stem van Calvijn geeft een historisch reliëf aan het onderzoek en helpt om te reflecteren op de vraag, waar we als gereformeerde familie vandaan komen en wat er in ons DNA zit. Het verschaft ook een voorbeeld van hoe de theologie en praktijk van de kinderdoop, zoals die in de Middeleeuwen fungeerde, in de Reformatietijd opnieuw werd toegeëigend door een theoloog die voor de gereformeerden bij wie wij onderzoek gedaan hebben nog steeds als een gezaghebbende persoon wordt gezien. Vervolgens worden de verschillende toe-eigeningen in een interculturele conversatie samengebracht. Zo wil ik ook een eerste inventarisatie geven van de theologische en praktische vragen waarvoor de gereformeerde leer en praktijk van de kinderdoop vandaag staat – zowel intern, als oecumenisch en interreligieus. Tenslotte reflecteer ik op de vraag, wat we van deze 'case study' kunnen leren voor het intercultureel beoefenen van gereformeerde theologie vandaag.

De hoofdvraag voor het onderzoek luidt:
'Wat kunnen we door het bestuderen van de toe-eigening van de kinderdoop door gereformeerde gelovigen in verschillende contexten leren over de kansen en uitdagingen voor het intercultureel beoefenen van gereformeerde theologie?'
Hieruit vloeien de volgende deelvragen voort:
1. Hoe eigenen gereformeerde gelovigen in Noord India, Centraal Malawi en Nederland zich vandaag de gereformeerde theologie en praktijk van de kinderdoop toe?
2. Hoe werd de theologie en praktijk van de kinderdoop toegeëigend in de historische context van het Genève van Calvijn?
3. Wat zijn de overeenkomsten en verschillen tussen de gereformeerde toe-eigeningen van de kinderdoop in de onderzochte contexten tegen de achtergrond van de gereformeerde traditie van de 16^{e} en 17^{e} eeuw?
4. Wat kunnen we leren van deze verschillende toe-eigeningen voor een gereformeerde theologie en praktijk van de kinderdoop vandaag?
5. Wat kunnen we leren van de interculturele conversatie over de kinderdoop voor het intercultureel beoefenen van gereformeerde theologie vandaag?

2. Onderzoeksmethodologie
Dit onderzoek wil alleen bijdragen aan een beter begrip van de interculturele toe-eigening van de gereformeerde theologie en traditie, maar ook een methodologische bijdrage leveren aan het beoefenen van interculturele theologie. Voor het empirisch onderzoek gebruik ik drie modellen:

1. Het model van de Theology in Four Voices ('theologie in vier stemmen'), ontwikkeld door Cameron en anderen, gebruik ik om de verschillende theologische stemmen in de praktijk van de doop weer te geven. Het model onderscheidt vier theologische stemmen:
* de normatieve stem (*normative voice*) zoals die tot uitdrukking komt in de Bijbel, de gereformeerde belijdenissen en de kerkordes die gelden binnen de verschillende gereformeerd-presbyteriaanse kerken waar de respondenten toe behoren. Deze stem is bestudeerd door literatuuronderzoek.
* de formele stem (*formal voice*) is beschreven met behulp van (1) individuele interviews met geschoolde theologen (predikanten en theologiedocenten) en (2) door literatuuronderzoek van liturgische formulieren en publicaties over de kinderdoop in de drie contexten waarin onderzoek is gedaan.
* de 'aangenomen' stem (*espoused voice*) is in dit onderzoek wat de gewone gelovigen in interviews vertellen over de gereformeerde kinderdoop, zoals zij die als betekenisvolle praktijk aannemen en ervaren.
* de 'inherente' stem (*operant voice*) heeft in dit onderzoek betrekking op de theologie die inherent is aan of ingebed is in de fysieke en liturgische aspecten van de kinderdoop en de invloed van de kinderdoop op het handelen en leven van gelovigen en hun kinderen.
Dit model maakt goed zichtbaar, dat de praktijk van 'de' gereformeerde kinderdoop (zoals die beschreven wordt in de belijdenissen en officiële kerkelijk documenten), in de theologie en praktijk van gereformeerde voorgangers en gemeenteleden in verschillende contexten rijk geschakeerd is en soms verre van eenduidig.

2. Voor het beschrijven en analyseren van lokale toe-eigeningen van de kinderdoop in de gereformeerde familie gebruik ik een model dat voortbouwt op een onderzoeksmodel van Saroglou (en anderen). Hiermee maak ik het begrip 'toe-eigening' onderzoekbaar, door vier aspecten te onderscheiden: 1. geloven (believing), 2. behoren bij (belonging), 3. handelen (behaving) en 4. ervaren (experiencing) – kortweg het BBBE-model genoemd. Met deze vier aspecten structureer ik (impliciet) de interviews en vervolgens ook de beschrijving en analyse van de onderzoeksdata voor elk van de contexten. Het doel is om zo 'rijke' theologische beschrijvingen of narratieven van de theologie en praktijk van de kinderdoop in de verschillende contexten te krijgen.

3. Tenslotte worden de drie actuele contextanalyses, de inbreng van Calvijn toe-eigening in Genève en de stem van de Bijbel en de gereformeerde belijdenissen in een 'interculturele conversatie' bijeen gebracht. Deze conversatie is niet bedoeld om tot een homogene gereformeerde theologie van de kinderdoop te komen, maar om binnen het gedeelde referentiekader van de canonieke Schriften en de gereformeerde belijdenissen, als 'wereldwijde gereformeerde familie' van elkaar te leren en samen te reflecteren op historische en actuele toe-eigeningen van de kinderdoop en te onderzoeken, welke mogelijkheden en uitdagingen dit oplevert voor de toekomst van de theologie en praktijk van de kinderdoop in de gereformeerde familie.

3. Drie eigentijdse contexten
3.1. RPCI – Noord India
De eerste context waar ik onderzoek heb gedaan naar de toe-eigening van de kinderdoop is Noord India. De respondenten kwamen uit drie gemeentes van de Reformed Presbyterian Church of India (RPCI). In dit deel van India vormen christenen een kleine en vaak bedreigde minderheid. De cultureel-religieuze context is sterk gestempeld door het Hindoeïsme en verder is de RPCI ook

slechts een kleine christelijke denominatie in vergelijking tot de Evangelische en Pentecostale kerken in de regio. De geschoolde theologen maken actief deel uit van de wereldwijde 'Reformed family'. Zij hebben hun opleiding soms geheel of gedeeltelijk in het Westen gehad, ze hebben (mede) Westerse theologen als docent gehad en hun studieboeken waren met name van Westerse auteurs. Zij nemen actief deel aan internationale christelijke (digitale) netwerken, bezoeken internationale conferenties en zijn geïnspireerd door Westerse theologen en theologische literatuur. De 'gewone gelovigen' die ik interviewde zijn deels binnen de lokale RPCI opgegroeid, maar soms ook pas later lid van de RPCI geworden; ze hebben dus ook theologische vorming in het Hindoeïsme of andere christelijke denominaties ontvangen. Als het gaat om de toe-eigening van de kinderdoop, dan sluiten de geschoolde theologen dicht aan bij de gereformeerde theologie, zoals die in de gereformeerde belijdenissen verwoord is. In de interviews met 'gewone gelovigen' komt de invloed van de cultureel-religieuze context op het toe-eigenen van de kinderdoop veel sterker naar voren.

*** Geloven (believing)**
Uit reactie tegen de Hindoeïstische waterrituelen die verlossing ('moksa') beloven, benadrukken de geschoolde theologen, maar ook veel gewone gelovigen, dat we niet door het water van de doop, maar alleen door Christus gered kunnen worden. Een 'magische' werking van de kinderdoop wordt expliciet afgewezen. Het gaat in de kinderdoop allereerst om het teken en zegel van Gods verbond en verkiezing. Tegelijkertijd legt een aantal gewone gelovigen de nadruk op de bescherming die de doop biedt tegen de vijandige invloed van de Hindoe-omgeving en kwaadwillende mensen op de kinderen. De doop onderscheidt het kind van de Hindoe-gelovigen, en verschaft tegelijkertijd de bescherming die nodig is om relaties met Hindoe-familieleden te kunnen onderhouden.

*** Behoren bij (belonging)**
De kinderdoop markeert in de Noord Indiase context het horen bij de christelijke gemeenschap, maar ook bij de gereformeerde kerk. Enerzijds wordt een kind door de doop geclaimd voor de christelijke God. Anderzijds markeert de kinderdoop ook het verschil met kerken die de kinderdoop afwijzen. Als leden van de RPCI verhuizen naar een plaats in India waar geen gereformeerde kerk is, staat bij aansluiting bij een Evangelisch-Pentecostale kerk de geldigheid van de kinderdoop ter discussie. Als een gelovige zich haar doop nog kan herinneren, wordt er geen overdoop gevraagd, anders wel. Dit leidt er toe, dat ouders hun kinderen vaak pas op wat latere leeftijd jaar laten dopen (3-8 jaar), 'zodat ze zich in ieder geval iets kunnen herinneren'.

*** Handelen (behaving)**
De vraag wie het handelend subject is in de doop wordt verschillend beantwoord. Voor de geschoolde theologen is het allereerst God die in de doop zijn genadige beloften geeft en zijn verbond met de ouders sluit. Voor een aantal RPCI ouders gaat het echter vooral om hun eigen belofte aan God, terwijl anderen ook sterk benadrukken, dat God hun kinderen door de doop beschermt en op een bijzondere manier persoonlijk aanwezig is.
De kinderdoop wordt uitsluitend bediend door besprenkeling. Dit gebeurt deels uit praktische overwegingen: in de Noord Indiase context, met groeiende sociale druk van radicale Hindoes, is besprenkelen een praktijk die minder aandacht trekt, in het kerkgebouw kan worden bediend en geen aanstoot geeft. Voor sommige predikanten fungeert besprenkeling ook als een 'identity marker' ten opzichte van Evangelische of Pentecostale kerken, waar de doop altijd door onderdompeling wordt bediend. Voor gewone gelovigen is de vorm van dopen echter van ondergeschikt belang.

*** Ervaren (experiencing)**
Tijdens de liturgie van de kinderdoop ervaren sommige ouders een speciale en persoonlijke aanwezigheid van God, die hen ervan verzekert van de betrouwbaarheid van de ene ware God van het christelijke geloof en van de uniciteit van de verlossing in Christus. Daarnaast getuigen de ouders

ook van Gods krachtige hulp en bescherming op andere momenten in hun leven (bijvoorbeeld bij ziekte en gevaar). In de religieuze Hindoe-context is de aanwezigheid van miljoenen goden en geesten een levende werkelijkheid, maar de ene God van het christendom geeft de gelovigen het houvast van een persoonlijke relatie. De ervaringen van Gods aanwezigheid en kracht zijn van grote waarde voor hun geloof en in het gesprek met Hindoes zijn ze van meer betekenis dan dogmatische argumenten.

3.2. CCAP Nkhoma – Centraal Malawi

De tweede context in dit onderzoek is Centraal Malawi. De respondenten zijn lid van de Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), Nkhoma Synod. Deze kerk vindt haar oorsprong in het zendingswerk van de Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk van Zuid-Afrika. De sociale context in Malawi is gestempeld door grote armoede, hoge sterftecijfers, een zwakke economie, die veelal afhankelijk is van een heel kwetsbare landbouw. De bevolking is voor bijna 80% christelijk, terwijl 14,2% van de bevolking tot de CCAP behoort. Hoewel de aanhang van de African Traditional Religion procentueel gezien gering is, is de invloed op de Centraal Malawiaanse christenen nog steeds aanwezig. In de traditionele Afrikaanse religie heeft de geestenwereld van voorouders en heksen directe invloed op het dagelijks leven: ziekte, armoede, onvruchtbaarheid en allerlei andere problemen zijn te herleiden tot boze geestelijke krachten, die bezworen moeten worden. Christelijk ouders geloven, dat hun kinderen in het krachtenveld staan van een gevecht tussen kwade geestelijke krachten en de God van het christelijke geloof.
De predikanten geven aan dat ze de gereformeerde leer van de doop verkondigen, zoals die beschreven wordt in de gereformeerde belijdenis en in het doopsformulier. Ze wijzen de gelovigen op de doop als teken en zegel van het verbond en afwassing van zonden, maar leggen vooral de nadruk op de verantwoordelijkheid van de ouders voor een christelijke opvoeding.

* Geloven (believing)

In de African Traditional Religion wordt God gezien als het ‘Opperwezen’ (‘Supreme Being’), die alleen door bemiddeling van voorouders en waarzeggers kan worden benaderd. Gereformeerde christenen ervaren God niet als een ‘verre’, maar wel als een ‘hoge’ God, die niet als ‘Vader’ wordt aangesproken, maar als ‘Heer’ (Mulungu). Door de doop komt God echter dichterbij: als de ouders bidden voor het gedoopte kind, zal God zich dat kind herinneren. In de doop sluiten ouders een verbond met God, brengen zij hun kind ‘aan Gods kant’ en dragen zij het op aan God. Kinderen worden in de doop symbolisch bedekt door het bloed van Jezus en zo is de kinderdoop allereerst een teken van bescherming tegen de macht van de duivel, heksen en andere kwade machten. Tegelijkertijd hebben gewone gelovigen hun vragen bij de kracht en effectiviteit van Gods belofte van bescherming bij de doop. In aanvulling daarop zoeken ze ook bescherming in de traditionele religieuze praktijken. Zo is er vaak sprake van een ‘dubbele praktijk’: ouders die hun kinderen laten dopen gebruiken vaak ook nog traditionele rituelen, amuletten, beschermende voorwerpen, of bezoeken traditionele waarzeggers of bezweerders.

* Behoren bij (belonging)

In de traditionele samenleving was ‘umunthu’ (‘ubuntu’) een kernwaarde: de menselijkheid van het individu is afhankelijk van de sociale gemeenschap waarin men een plek heeft. Tot op zekere hoogte neemt de kerk deze traditionele waarden van de samenleving over en de kinderdoop is daarvan de bezegeling. Een kind dat gedoopt is, wordt daarmee ingelijfd in haar of zijn christelijke familie. Door de doop wordt het op de rechte weg geplaatst, kan het opgroeien tot een volwassen persoon, een waardevol lid van de samenleving en zal het niet snel van God wegdwalen.

* Handelen (behaving)

Voor ouders heeft de doop vaak een instrumentele functie: wanneer zij hun verantwoordelijkheid nemen, door een verbond met God te sluiten, vertrouwen zij er op dat God ook zijn deel doen:

zonde vergeven en het kind bewaren op het rechte pad. De vaders zijn vaak afwezig bij de doopplechtigheid, of blijven in de kerkbanken zitten, omdat zij geen belijdend lid van de kerk zijn. In een gezin worden vaak slechts enkele van de kinderen gedoopt is. Soms worden kinderen door hun grootouders of een ouderling ten doop gehouden, wat het belang van de kinderdoop voor de bredere gemeenschap onderstreept, maar ook aangeeft, dat ouders beperkt verantwoordelijkheid nemen voor de christelijke opvoeding van hun kinderen..

*** Ervaren (experiencing)**
Na de kinderdoop zijn de ouders blij: hun kind maakt nu deel uit van de gemeenschap met God, de christelijke familie en de kerk. Als een kind gedoopt is, zijn de ouders opgelucht: de angst voor heksen en boze geesten verdwijnt en ouders krijgen door de doop kracht om hun kinderen in het geloof groot te brengen. Verschillende ouders getuigden ook van een directe ervaring van Gods aanwezigheid bij de doop, wat voor hen de waarde van de kinderdoop in de Centraal Malawiaanse context onderstreept.

3.3. GKV – Nederland

De derde context in dit onderzoek is Nederland. De respondenten komen uit drie gemeenten van de Gereformeerde Kerk (vrijgemaakt) in Nederland (GKV). Deze kerk heeft haar wortels in de Afscheiding (1834) en de Doleantie (1886) en bestaat als zelfstandige denominatie sinds de Vrijmaking (1944) [93] De leden van de GKV leven in een sterk seculariserende context, waar religie als een puur individuele aangelegenheid wordt gezien en zo uit het publieke domein wordt verdrongen. Een van de gevolgen van secularisatie voor de GKV is kerkverlating, vooral onder jongeren. Een tweede belangrijke context voor de GKV respondenten is de Evangelisch-Pentecostale beweging, die een grote aantrekkingskracht uitoefent op GKV-leden. Dit is niet alleen zichtbaar in het vertrek van betrokken kerkleden naar Evangelische gemeentes, maar ook in een evangelicalisering van de liturgie en geloofsbeleving binnen de GKV. Dit leidt er ook toe, dat de vraag naar de geldigheid van de kinderdoop geregeld opkomt. In de GKV-context vertolken de predikanten als geschoolde theologen veelal de normatieve en formele theologische stemmen en spreken over de kinderdoop in de lijn van de gereformeerde belijdenissen en de doopformulieren.

Geloven (believing)
Voor veel gewone gelovigen laat de doop in de eerste plaats zien, dat God als een Vader van zijn kinderen houdt, voor ze zorgt, altijd voor ze klaar staat en bij wie ze altijd terug kunnen komen. Geloven heeft een sterk therapeutische functie en dat wordt ook weerspiegeld in de toe-eigening van de kinderdoop. De respondenten geven geregeld aan, dat ze moeite hebben met bepaalde aspecten van de doop zoals die in de doopformulieren beschreven staat. Zo vertrouwen ouders wel op een vergeving van toekomstige zonden van hun kinderen, maar zien hun kind lang niet altijd als ‘in zonde ontvangen en geboren’. Andere aspecten van de kinderdoop die genoemd worden in de doopformulieren (bijvoorbeeld het in de doop met Christus begraven en opgewekt worden, het gereinigd worden door het bloed van Christus, de vernieuwing door de Heilige Geest) worden niet ontkend, maar lijken niet relevant voor de toe-eigening van de kinderdoop.

Behoren bij (belonging)
In de Nederlandse context worden de grenzen tussen verschillende denominaties vloeiender en wordt formeel kerklidmaatschap minder belangrijk. In die context fungeert de kinderdoop vooral als een teken van persoonlijk toebehoren God, maar minder als teken van horen bij de kerk. De doop geldt ook niet als een onderscheidend teken ten opzichte van ongedoopte kinderen, mede omdat veel ouders Evangelische familie of vrienden hebben die hun kinderen niet laten dopen, maar wel een christelijke opvoeding geven. De kerk wordt echter wel gezien als een warme gemeenschap, een

[93] Per 1 mei 2023 is de GKV gefuseerd met de NGK tot de ‘Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerken’. Omdat gedurende het veldonderzoek de GKV nog zelfstandig was, wordt hier aanduiding GKV gebruikt.

veilige plek in een seculiere en bedreigende wereld en waar ouders hun kinderen in een beschermde omgeving kunnen opvoeden.

Handelen (behaving)
De invloed van de Evangelische beweging resulteert vaak in een hybride theologie van de kinderdoop: Gods initiatief en belofte in de doop wordt niet ontkend, maar de keus en religieuze ervaring van de ouders staat bij een aantal respondenten op de voorgrond. Dit wordt ook zichtbaar in het feit dat sommige ouders hun kinderen willen laten dopen door onderdompeling, terwijl ouders in de doopdienst soms ook een persoonlijk getuigenis willen geven.

Ervaren (experiencing)
In de Nederlandse context is veel aandacht voor authenticiteit en beleving. Het verlangen naar 'ervaring' komt ook tot uitdrukking bij de kinderdoop. Verschillende ouders getuigen van hun ervaring van Gods bijzondere wijze aanwezigheid bij de doop. Bij een aantal ouders verschuift de betekenis van de doop van een meer forensische betekenis (vergeving van zonden, verandering van eigenaarschap, overgang van dood naar leven) naar een therapeutische betekenis (persoonlijke expressie van een warme relatie met een God die er altijd is om je te helpen en te troosten): God is een goede Schepper, die prachtig nieuw leven geeft. Kinderen zijn parels in Gods hand.

4. Een historische context - Calvijns toe-eigening van de kinderdoop in Genève
In de 16e-eeuwse context van Calvijn was de praktijk van de kinderdoop algemeen verbreid: afgezien van enkele kleine 'ketterse' groepen lieten alle ouders hun kinderen zo vroeg mogelijk dopen en in het geval van levensgevaar werd een nooddoop bediend, omdat de doop als noodzakelijk werd beschouwd voor de verlossing van het kind. De doop werd in de kerk of thuis bediend, maar niet in de context van een gewone kerkdienst (of mis). De ouders waren meestal afwezig, net als de gemeenschap van de gelovigen.
In de loop van de Middeleeuwen was de toe-eigening van de kinderdoop steeds meer beïnvloed door bijgeloof. Door angst voor ziekte, hekserij en kwade geesten kreeg de kinderdoop het karakter van een exorcisme, een ritueel om de duivel en zijn invloed uit te bannen. Bij de Reformatie van de kerk in Genève zette Calvijn de kinderdoop als een door Christus ingesteld sacrament voort. Hij vocht echter in de context van de stadsreformatie van Genève wel voor een Bijbelse herbronning, een nieuwe toe-eigening van de kinderdoop.
De erfenis van Calvijn is deel blijven uitmaken van het DNA van de wereldwijde gereformeerde familie. In de interculturele conversatie levert Calvijns toe-eigening in Genève een historische bijdrage, die helpt om te reflecteren op de vraag, hoe de theologie en praktijk van de kinderdoop in de gereformeerde familie is ontstaan, hoe ze vandaag in de verschillende contexten tot uitdrukking komt en hoe het verder zouden kunnen gaan.

Geloven (believing)
De doop is voor Calvijn een zichtbaar teken en zegel van Gods verkiezing en adoptie, initiatie in de kerk. De doop verzegelt Gods genadige belofte van vergeving en inlijving in de dood en opstanding van Christus. De effectiviteit van de doop wordt niet verbonden aan de handeling van de doop of het water, maar aan het werk van de Heilige Geest, dat zichtbaar wordt als het kind bij het opgroeien tot wedergeboorte en geloof komt. De kinderdoop is voor Calvijn een volwaardig sacrament, niet alleen omdat het te vergelijken is met de besnijdenis in het Oude Testament, maar ook omdat het Nieuwe Testament laat zien, dat God trouw is aan de gelovigen en hun kinderen.

Behoren bij (belonging)
Voor Calvijn was de kinderdoop allereerst een inlijving in het verbond en de kerk: het kind krijgt van God als Vader een plaats in de kerk als haar moeder. Het kind ontvangt door de doop het voorrecht

om verenigd te worden met Christus in zijn dood en opstanding. Het mag horen bij de kerk, de werkplaats van de Heilige Geest, waar het leert om met God te wandelen. De doop heeft een onherhaalbaar karakter, omdat Gods beloften van het behoren tot zijn volk, vergeving van zonde en de werking van de Heilige Geest voor eens en altijd gegeven zijn.

Handelen (behaving)
De doophandeling werd ontdaan van rituele elementen die verwijzen naar exorcisme, omdat het kind van gelovige ouders al vanaf de moederschoot heilig is. De doop vond nu plaats in een kerkdienst, in aanwezigheid van in ieder geval de vader, omdat hij verantwoordelijkheid moest nemen voor de christelijke en praktische opvoeding van het kind. De kinderen moeten bij het opgroeien in geloof antwoorden op Gods beloften en strijden tegen de zonde en de duivel.

Ervaren (experiencing)
De doop geeft christelijke ouders blijdschap en versterkt hun liefde tot God, als ze zien, dat Hij hun kinderen aanneemt en vergeeft. Gods vaderlijke zorg en liefde geven de ouders kracht voor een christelijke opvoeding van hun kinderen.

5. Interculturele Conversatie
In de interculturele conversatie worden de verschillende stemmen die in het onderzoek zijn beschreven en geanalyseerd met elkaar in gesprek gebracht. Er zijn meerdere lagen in de conversatie:
- synchroon: de stemmen van de respondenten uit de RPCI (Noord India), CCAP Nkhoma in Centraal Malawi en de Nederlandse GKV;
- diachroon: de historische stem van Calvijns toe-eigening van de kinderdoop in de context van de reformatie van de kerk in Geneva
- normatief en ecclesiologisch: de stem van de canonieke Schriften, de gereformeerde belijdenissen en de verschillende doopformulieren
De conversatie vindt plaats in de context van de wereldwijde gereformeerde familie en het besef dat we als gereformeerde gelovigen samen gericht zijn op Gods leiding.
Het doel van de conversatie is niet, om tot een homogene gereformeerde theologie en praktijk van de kinderdoop te komen, maar om te onderzoeken hoe een ‘eenheid in verscheidenheid’ als een vorm van samenleven (*‘convivencia’*) en wederzijds leren binnen de gereformeerde familie zou kunnen functioneren.

Geloven (believing)
De interculturele conversatie laat zien, dat de kinderdoop voor bijna alle respondenten een teken is, dat God als een Vader wil zorgen voor de kinderen van de gelovigen. In de verschillende contexten wijzen ouders de gedachte af, dat de kinderdoop noodzakelijk zou zijn voor de verlossing van hun kinderen of dat er magische kracht in het doopritueel zou schuilen. Tegelijkertijd is kinderdoop voor de ouders wel ‘effectief’ en geloven zij, dat de kinderdoop een teken en zegel van Gods bescherming is. De gevaren waartegen bescherming nodig is zijn per context verschillend: in Noord India gaat het om de religieuze dreiging vanuit de Hindoe-context, in Centraal Malawi om de zwarte magie van heksen en boze geesten, in Nederland om de verleiding en intimidatie van de seculiere context.
In alle drie de contexten bevestigen de geschoolde theologen, dat kinderen in zonde ontvangen en geboren worden. In alle drie de contexten vragen sommige ouders zich af, of kleine kinderen inderdaad zondig zijn (erfzonde): is de kinderdoop een teken en zegel van het afwassen van de zonde, of is het een belofte van ‘toekomstige vergeving’? Sommige ouders zien geen verband tussen vergeving en kinderdoop.
Volgens de stemmen van Calvijn in de Geneefse context en de gereformeerde belijdenissen is de kinderdoop wel onlosmakelijk verbonden met de leer van de erfzonde. De vraag die opkomt is: waarom zouden onschuldige kinderen symbolisch gewassen moeten worden met het bloed van

Christus? Heeft het water van de kinderdoop zonder de leer van de erfzonde wel voldoende diepgang?

Behoren bij (belonging)
In de verschillende contexten noemen de respondenten het behoren bij het verbond en bij de christelijke gemeente als kenmerkend voor de betekenis van de kinderdoop, maar er zijn, met name onder de gewone gelovigen, verschillende inzichten rond de betekenis van het verbond. In alle drie de contexten geldt, dat voor een deel van de ouders Gods uitverkiezing en roeping voorop staat. Vooral in de RPCI (Noord India) is dat het geval. Andere ouders, met name in de Malawiaanse CCAP Nkhoma, stellen juist de menselijke keus centraal en zien het verbond als instrumenteel: wanneer ouders een verbond met God maken, zal God van zijn kant de kinderen zal helpen en beschermen. Een ander verschil betreft de relatie tussen de kinderdoop en de kerk. In de Noord Indiase RPCI is de doop een teken van het horen bij de christelijke gemeenschap, die scherp onderscheiden is van de vijandige Hindoecontext. In Centraal Malawiaanse CCAP Nkhoma speelt de traditionele gemeenschapsgedachte ('umunthu') een grote rol: het individu bestaat dankzij de gemeenschap en daarom is het ook verbond met God iets van de hele gemeenschap. In de Nederlandse GKV context is de kinderdoop vooral een individueel teken van het verbond tussen God en het kind van gelovige ouders. In de interviews blijkt dat ouders in de RPCI en de GKV verantwoordelijkheid te nemen voor de christelijke opvoeding van hun kinderen, terwijl in de collectivistische CCAP Nkhoma de vaders veelal afwezig zijn bij de doop en de geloofsopvoeding overlaten aan de moeders, de grootouders en de gemeenschap.
Volgens de stemmen van Calvijn in de Geneefse context en de gereformeerde belijdenissen is de kinderdoop een teken en zegel van Gods genadige keus en van de inlijving in het verbond en initiatie in de christelijke gemeente. Door hun doopbelofte nemen de ouders verantwoordelijkheid voor opvoeding van de kinderen.
De vraag die uit deze conversatie voortkomt is, hoe de kinderdoop van betekenis kan zijn in het spanningsveld van individuele toewijding van dopelingen aan God en persoonlijke verantwoordelijkheid van ouders enerzijds en het zich voegen in en bijdragen aan de christelijke gemeenschap anderzijds?

Handelen (behaving)
In de interculturele conversatie is de vraag naar het subject van de doop een belangrijk onderwerp: gaat het allereerst om Gods handelen in de doop als genademiddel, om de keus en belijdenis van de ouders of om beide? Voegt het sacrament van de doop iets toe aan het gesproken Woord? In alle drie contexten blijkt, dat predikanten nauwelijks tot geen aandacht besteden aan de vraag naar het 'extra' van de kinderdoop ten opzichte van het Woord. De ouders uit de verschillende onderzochte kerken kijken hier verschillend tegenaan. Vooral in de Noord Indiase RPCI en de Malawiaanse CCAP Nkhoma leggen veel ouders de nadruk op hun eigen belofte en hun initiatief in het maken van het verbond, maar ook voor ouders in de GKV lijkt de kinderdoop vaak veel 'opdragen'.
Calvijn en de gereformeerde belijdenissen benoemen de 'extra dimensie' van de doop: door de doop geeft de Heilige Geest op een persoonlijke en indringende manier Gods teken en zegel aan de gelovigen. De vraag is, of aandacht voor de verzegeling in de kinderdoop ('extra dimensie') kan bijdragen aan een doorgaande toe-eigening? En verder: welke rol kan de verzegeling door de Geest spelen in het oecumenisch gesprek met hen die de kinderdoop afwijzen of in het interreligieuze gesprek?
In verband met de doophandeling zelf komt de vraag naar besprenkeling of onderdompeling op. In de Noord Indiase RPCI wordt besprenkeling als 'typisch gereformeerde' praktijk benadrukt, een zelf-identificatie die het verschil met zowel Hindoe-praktijken als Evangelisch-Pentecostal kerken scherp stelt. In de Nederlandse GKV gaan juist stemmen op om kinderen te dopen door onderdompeling, wat past in de sterk op beleving en 'embodiment' gerichte context. In de Malawiaanse CCAP-context is juist heel weinig aandacht voor het visuele en sacramentele aspect van de kinderdoop. De

historische stemmen van Calvijn en de gereformeerde belijdenissen hechten weinig waarde aan de wijze van doopbediening. Hier komt de vraag op, wat de betekenis is van de vorm van doopbediening voor de toe-eigening van de kinderdoop in verschillende contexten?

Ervaren (experiencing)
Als het in de interculturele conversatie gaat om het ervaren van God in en door de kinderdoop, is het opvallend, dat er in elke context gelovigen zijn die vertellen dat ze Gods persoonlijke, bijna tastbare aanwezigheid bij de kinderdoop hebben ervaren. Deze aanwezigheid wordt echter niet ervaren als 'verlossing' (soteriologisch), maar als beschermend, bevrijdend en bemoedigend (therapeutisch). De geschoolde theologen spraken echter in het geheel niet over deze ervaringen. De historische stem van Calvijn en de gereformeerde confessies wijzen duidelijk op de verzekering van Gods beloften die de Heilige Geest aan de gelovigen schenkt door het gebruik van het sacrament en de kinderdoop. De gewone gelovigen spreken echter nauwelijks expliciet over de Heilige Geest, maar wel over een bijna mystieke ervaring van Gods nabijheid. De vraag is, hoe geschoolde theologen de ervaringen van gewone gelovigen kunnen gebruiken in hun toe-eigeningen van de kinderdoop in en voor hun context? Verder, wat kunnen deze Godservaringen betekenen voor het oecumenische gesprek, alsook voor het interreligieuze gesprek van gereformeerde gelovigen met niet-Christenen?

De laatste conclusie uit de interculturele conversatie is, dat er voor vruchtbare toe-eigeningen van de kinderdoop in de verschillende contexten, een hernieuwde Bijbelse en confessionele herbronning nodig is. Deze moet zich niet defensief richten op vragen rond de legitimiteit van de kinderdoop, maar juist het theologisch en pastoraal belang van het toegeëigende sacrament van de kinderdoop in de wereldwijde gereformeerde familie demonstreren.

Lessen voor het intercultureel beoefenen van gereformeerd theologie
De hoofdvraag voor het onderzoek luidt: 'Wat kunnen we door het bestuderen van de toe-eigening van de kinderdoop door gereformeerde gelovigen in verschillende contexten leren over de kansen en uitdagingen voor het intercultureel beoefenen van gereformeerde theologie?'
Na het beantwoorden van de deelvragen trek ik in het laatste hoofdstuk de lessen uit het interculturele onderzoek, dat culmineerde in een interculturele conversatie. De lessen uit dit onderzoek vallen in drie categorieën uiteen:

1. Persoonlijk lessen
Het belangrijkste dat ik als onderzoeker, theoloog en als gereformeerde gelovige van dit interculturele onderzoek heb geleerd, was het inzicht in mijn eigen positionaliteit als onderzoeker in een intercultureel onderzoek – de onderzoeker als 'onderzoeksinstrument'. Daarnaast heb ik met name uit de interculturele conversatie geleerd, hoe de ontmoeting met geschoolde theologen en gewone gelovigen uit andere contexten vruchtbaar gemaakt kan worden voor het intercultureel beoefenen van de gereformeerde theologie.

2. Hermeneutische lessen
In dit onderzoek heb ik het begrip 'toe-eigening' ('appropriation') gebruikt om te exploreren, of en hoe gereformeerde gelovigen uit verschillende contexten zich de kinderdoop (bewust of onbewust) eigen maken, zodat het als teken en zegel van God raakt aan het hart en leven van de gelovigen. Uit het veldonderzoek blijkt, dat de respondenten binnen het gedeelte kader van de gereformeerde familie op een creatieve manier omgaan met de theologie en praktijk van de kinderdoop. Sommige elementen uit de gereformeerde belijdenissen en doopformulieren worden overgenomen met een nieuwe contextuele interpretatie, andere elementen worden genegeerd of soms ook uitvergroot. Tegelijkertijd zijn er nieuwe toe-eigeningen, zoals de kinderdoop als bescherming tegen invloeden van de Hindoecontext, bescherming tegen boze geesten en heksen, de aandacht voor kinderdoop

door onderdompeling en het belang van het persoonlijk getuigenis van de doopouders. Ook de ervaring van Gods intensieve aanwezigheid bij de kinderdoop in de drie onderzoekscontexten was nieuw en vraagt om verdere theologische reflectie – zowel in de context van de gereformeerde familie, als voor het oecumenisch en interreligieus gesprek over de kinderdoop. Het onderzoek laat tenslotte zien, hoe verschillende nieuwe toe-eigeningen kunnen worden begrepen als antwoorden op (contextueel-bepaalde) vragen die leven in de harten en levens van gelovigen.

3. Methodologische en praktische lessen

Tenslotte wilde dit onderzoek exploreren, hoe de interculturele beoefening van gereformeerde theologie in de praktijk zou kunnen functioneren. Daartoe is gebruik gemaakt van twee modellen: het model 'Theologie in vier stemmen' (Theology in Four Voices) en het BBBE-model (Believing / geloven; Belonging / behoren bij; Behaving / handelen; Experiencing / ervaren).

Op deze manier werden in iedere context de theologische stemmen van geschoolde theologen en gewone gemeenteleden gehoord. Die stemmen waren nu eens gelijk, dan weer aanvullend, maar soms ook tegenstrijdig. Het belang van dit model was, dat ook de 'zachte' stemmen van gewone gelovigen gehoord werden, wat soms verrassende nieuwe perspectieven op de doop opleverde. Sommige aspecten van de toe-eigening van de kinderdoop, zoals de kinderdoop als bescherming en een intensieve Godservaring bij de doop, werden door gewone gelovigen ingebracht en zouden zonder hun inbreng niet ontdekt zijn.

Het BBBE-model maakt het begrip 'toe-eigening' onderzoekbaar en hielp om in de onderzoekscontexten een rijke beschrijving van de toe-eigening van de kinderdoop te maken. Door de interviews met dit model te structureren en te analyseren konden de contexten vervolgens goed met elkaar in gesprek worden gebracht in een interculturele conversatie.

Een bekend adagium van de gereformeerde familie is: '*ecclesia reformata quia semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*'. Het doel van deze conversatie was niet om de resultaten van het veldonderzoek te homogeniseren of bepaalde stemmen tot zwijgen te brengen, maar om zichtbaar te maken, wat belangrijk is voor een 'convivencia', een samenleven met de kinderdoop in de eenheid en verscheidenheid van de wereldwijde gereformeerde familie.

Summary

The main research question for this research project is: *What does the appropriation of infant baptism by Reformed believers in different contexts teach us about the possibilities and challenges for doing Reformed theology interculturally today?*

The following sub-questions are derived from this:
1. How is the Reformed theology and practice of infant baptism appropriated by Reformed believers in North India, Central Malawi and the Netherlands today?
2. How was the theology and practice of infant baptism appropriated in the historical context of Calvin's Geneva?
3. What are the similarities and differences in the Reformed appropriations of infant baptism in the researched contemporary contexts, against the background of the 16th and 17th-century Reformed tradition?
4. What can be learned from the different appropriations for a Reformed theology of infant baptism?
5. What can be learned from the intercultural conversation on infant baptism for doing Reformed theology interculturally today?

I explore the appropriations of infant baptism in three contexts by using:
- the Believing-Belonging-Behaving-Experiencing-model, which I developed to map various aspects of the theology and practice of infant baptism
- the model of 'Theology in Four Voices' (Cameron and others), which discerns various theological voices in a context (the normative, formal, espoused and operant theological voices).
In this way, rich descriptions of the appropriation of infant baptism per context are gained.
In addition to this, Calvin's historical voice is listened to, which helps to reflect on the origins of the Reformed family (the DNA), as well as on where we stand now and what directions for the future would be.
Next, the various voices are brought together in an intercultural conversation to understand the opportunities and challenges for the theology and practice of infant baptism in the Reformed family.

In the North Indian context, the members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of India are in a minority position and often experience hostility from the surrounding Hindu majority. Reformed parents believe that infant baptism protects the child against the threat of Hindu religiosity and other dangers. It is also an identity marker over and against Evangelical-Pentecostal churches: often children are baptized when they are a bit older (3-8) so that when they remember their baptism, they are not required to be rebaptized when they move to another place and join an Evangelical church later in life. Some parents experience God's intensified presence at infant baptism, which assures them of his protection and the trustworthiness of the Christian God.

In the Central Malawian context, the respondents belong to the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (Nkhoma Synod). While 80% of the Malawian population is Christian, the influence of traditional African religion is still present among church members, including Reformed Christians, who are afraid of spiritual powers. In infant baptism, they dedicate their child to God and believe that God will protect their child against witchcraft and demonic powers. Parents feel relief after baptism and some remember that they experienced God's special presence at baptism, proving to them the value of infant baptism. However, several parents also visit witch doctors to protect their children, which means that there is a 'double practice'.
There is a strong sense of community among the believers ('*umunthu*') and infant baptism seals the relationship with the Christian church and family. However, at baptism, the fathers are usually

absent and sometimes grandparents or elders even take the responsibility for the children's baptism and Christian upbringing.

The Dutch respondents belong to the Reformed Church in the Netherlands and find themselves in a secularizing context, where the Christian faith is delegated from the public square to the private domain. There is also much influence from Evangelical-Pentecostal churches on liturgy and personal spirituality, which also raises questions about the validity of infant baptism. For Dutch parents, infant baptism speaks first of all about God's fatherly love for the children, who are seen as 'pearls in God's hand'. To them, infant baptism points mainly to the forgiveness of future sins, but they often have problems with the idea of children being born sinners. Infant baptism is primarily about the relationship between God and the child, and much less about belonging to the community of the church. In the Dutch context there is a strong desire for experience and authenticity. This sometimes also triggers parents to ask for baptism by immersion for their child. Some parents also wish to give a personal witness during the baptismal service.

Calvin's voice speaks of a historical appropriation of infant baptism in the context of the Reformation in Geneva. In the Medieval church, infant baptism had mainly become a rite of exorcism, triggered by the fear of demons and witches. The parents were typically absent. Calvin pleaded for biblical resourcing of infant baptism. To him, baptism signifies, first of all, God's gracious adoption, the initiation into the covenant and the church, being engrafted into Christ's death and resurrection and the forgiveness of original sin. The effectiveness of infant baptism is related to the work of the Holy Spirit, which becomes visible when the child comes to faith when it grows up. God's grace generates love for God in the hearts of the parents and encourages them to bring up their child as God's child.

Next, I bring the various voices into an intercultural conversation, to explore how a 'unity in diversity' or a mutually fruitful *'convivencia'* (living together) in the worldwide Reformed family could function.
Concerning 'believing', the parents in the research contexts believe that infant baptism protects against various threats, varying from context to context. There is also discussion about the relationship between the baptismal water and forgiveness of sin, as not all parents believe that their children are born sinners. The question arising is: what would the meaning of (the water of) infant baptism be if washing of (original) sin is no longer relevant for parents?
The 'belonging' aspect shows the relationship between infant baptism and belonging to God, the covenant, the church and the Christian family. In the North Indian RPCI, infant baptism is a clear mark of belonging to the church, distinguishing the children from the Hindu context and encouraging parents to take responsibility for the Christian upbringing of their children. In the Malawian CCAP Nkhoma, on the other hand, the role of the community ('*umunthu*') is very strong. Yet this can test the individual responsibility (especially of the fathers). In the Dutch RCN, the aspect of a personal relationship between God and the child is emphasised, but the relationship between infant baptism and the church community is less evident. This raises the question of what the place and function of infant baptism are in the tension between individual dedication to, and responsibility before, God and being part of the community of the church.
Concerning the 'behaving' aspect, two questions, in particular, are at stake. First, who is acting in baptism? To the trained theologians, it is clear that in infant baptism God is sealing his covenant with the parents and their children and giving His promises. Among the parents, there are different opinions in the three research contexts. For some parents, infant baptism is close to child dedication and especially in the CCAP Nkhoma, many parents believe that, in baptism, they are making a covenant with God. Calvin's voice from Geneva and the Reformed confessions speak of the 'extra dimension' of infant baptism in correlation with the Word and attribute this to the sealing work of the Holy Spirit. This raises the question of what the attention to this 'extra dimension' could contribute to the appropriation of infant baptism in various contexts.

Secondly, the mode of baptism (sprinkling or immersion) was not an issue in Calvin's Geneva and the Reformed confessions. However, in the PRCI sprinkling has become an identity marker for the Reformed churches and in the RCN some parents ask for infant baptism by immersion. In the CCAP Nkhoma, the water sign does not seem to have a specific impact on the believers. This shows that theological reflection on the mode of infant baptism is needed, especially concerning the role it has in the appropriation of infant baptism.
Thirdly, concerning the aspect of 'experience', the parents in the three research contexts talk about their experiences of an intensified divine presence at infant baptism, which affects them in a comforting and protective way. The trained theologians are silent about such experiences, although Calvin and the Reformed confessions speak about the sealing work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the believers. The question here is what more attention to the Holy Spirit could contribute to the appropriation of infant baptism by believers and how this could impact ecumenical and interreligious dialogues.
A final conclusion from the intercultural conversation is, that for fruitful appropriations in the various contexts a Biblical and confessional resourcing of the theology and practice of infant baptism is needed.

In the last chapter I answer the main research question by formulating three categories of lessons to be drawn from this research:
- personal lessons
I gained new insights about how the positionality of the researcher functions in intercultural research and how an intercultural conversation can serve the 'unity in diversity' in the worldwide Reformed family.
- hermeneutical lessons
In this research, the concept of 'appropriation' was used. As a result, we discerned how some aspects of infant baptism, as described in the reformed confessions and baptismal forms, were neglected, and others were modified or extrapolated. Also, new appropriations were discovered, for example, how infant baptism is related to the idea of 'protection' in various contextual ways, and how the mode of baptism (sprinkling or immersion) is being given new attention in the RPCI and the RCN. The experience of an intensified divine presence at baptism was observed in the three research contexts and deserves further theological reflection in the Reformed family and a place in ecumenical and interreligious conversations.
- methodological and practical lessons
Two research models were used: Theology in Four Voices, as well as the Believing-Belonging-Behaving-Experiencing-model. The combination of these models allowed a rich description of the theology and practice of infant baptism to be made for each research context, in which the 'soft' voices of ordinary believers played an important and constitutive role. The consequent use of the BBBE model enabled a structured intercultural conversation, showing how a conversation on infant baptism could serve a Reformed '*convivencia*', a living together in unity and diversity in the worldwide Reformed family.

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Curriculum Vitae

Jos Colijn was born in 1959. After finishing the Reformed high school (VWO) in Amersfoort, he studied German and Dutch language and literature at Utrecht University (1978–1982). He continued his studies at the Theological University Kampen (1984–1992). From 1989–1990 he did research on the recent history of the Hungarian Reformed Church at the Református Teológiai Akadémia, Debrecen (Hungary). From 1992–1996 he worked as a lecturer in Church History and Systematic theology at several theological institutions in Hungary, Transylvania (Romania) and Transcarpathia (Ukraine). Between 1997 and 2000 he served as pastor in the RCN IJsselmuiden. From 2001–2013 he was Academic Dean and lecturer at the Evangelical Reformed Seminary of Ukraine (Kyiv). From 2013 till today he works at the Theological University Kampen|Utrecht, where he teaches Intercultural Theology, coordinates the Master of Intercultural Reformed Theology programme, and serves as the International Officer.
Jos Colijn is married to Marlies; they have four children and four grandchildren.