

BAPTISM IN THE EVANGELICAL COVENANT CHURCH

The Covenant Church practices both infant and believer baptism. The Covenant includes both those who believe that infants are proper subjects of baptism and those who believe that only confessing persons are proper subjects. Denominations generally practice one or the other rather than both. This mixed practice is full of both problem and promise. In one sense, this unique approach points to the key in our common faith and life.

The Covenant's sole confessional standard is Scripture. While baptism is clearly commanded and practiced for believers, there is no direct teaching or example about children. Whether or not infants should be baptized is theologically derived from biblical teaching. It is a matter of Scripture plus theological reflection on biblical texts. Sincere Christians have differed on infant baptism through the centuries.

The Covenant was born in the nineteenth century revival movement in Sweden and America. Those who experienced new birth and awakening were divided over the issue of infant baptism. Yet they had the same spiritual experience. The new birth created a strong bond among believers that would not be broken by difference over baptism.

The result was that the doctrine of the church took priority over the theology of the sacraments. So strong was the conviction in the necessity of conversion that Covenanters believed that new birth was a requirement for church membership. Thus the Covenant was born a "Believer Church." It was to be open to all believers, but to believers only. Differences over baptism would not divide the church. The Covenant's uncompromising insistence on conversion for church membership also meant openness on baptism.

There are varying theologies among those who practice both understandings of baptism. In the Covenant the view that baptism is necessary for salvation is clearly rejected. However the presence of grace in baptism may be understood, the personal appropriation of God's saving grace in conversion is necessary. All parties agree that the external work of Christ for us is applied by the Triune God regeneratively in us.

The Covenant Church affirms baptism as a sacrament. In this sense, it is a means of grace, so long as one does not see it as saving grace. Originally a "Sacramentum" was an oath of loyalty made by Roman soldiers to their leader in which they swore obedience unto death. The early church used this term to describe a public covenant oath to Jesus as Lord. It, however, believed that God alone was the author and sustainer of the biblical covenant. Thus it had to mean more than simply a loyalty oath. It proclaimed the power of Christ's redeeming grace to both summon and seal that holy covenant. Thus baptism is both covenant and mystery.

Covenant people have recognized that baptism along with holy communion have been the two sacraments commanded by Christ. In doing what Jesus Christ commanded, i.e. baptizing, Covenanters have found the biblical language of covenant-making formative in understanding the sacraments. The act of covenant making, initiated and shaped totally by God, provides both the transcendent qualities of glory and grace and the more immanent qualities of promise and belonging. In word and sacrament the magnetism of God's redemptive promises are conveyed and confirmed. A sacrament, according to a widely used definition, is an outward sign of an inward and invisible grace. With characteristic succinctness, St. Augustine referred to sacraments as "visible words."

Those who practice infant baptism place more emphasis on Christ's grace present in behalf of the child and on the covenant affirmation made by parents and the congregation.

Those who practice believer baptism place more emphasis on the salvation wrought in a person who then affirms this covenant-making publicly by baptism.

There remain areas of unresolved sensitivity. One comes out of the recognition that infant and believer baptism are in fact mutually exclusive at critical points of theology and practice. The Covenant Church recognizes that those pastors who hold to the believer baptism position, and willingly choose to act contrary to their theological conviction by baptizing the children of those whose understanding of Scripture leads them to the infant baptism position, do so for the unity of the church. There are persons in the church who have been baptized as infants, but whose understanding of Scripture leads them to the position of believer baptism. Those pastors who hold an infant baptism position, and willingly baptize such persons contrary to their own personal theological conviction, also do so for the unity of the church. In both cases pastors are acting out of respect for the convictions of people they serve. And in both cases pastors administer the baptisms in such a way that neither the believer nor the infant baptism view is disparaged recognizing that such diversity of theology and practice has been present throughout much of the history of the Christian Church. Pastors make concessions concerning what is precious to them in order to serve the wider church and they deserve our thanks.

Another sensitivity lies in the area of contemporary ethnic ministries. The inclusiveness brought to the Covenant by the ministry of ethnic congregations invites recognition of pastoral contingencies regarding the practice of baptism. For reasons that have theological, historical, and political roots, particular modes of baptism are not practiced. The Covenant Church recognizes this by granting them the integrity of their common life. For example, among African American Covenanters, infant baptism is seldom practiced. Unless we allow for cultural contingency this policy may be experienced as oppression by a white overclass.

Likewise, Hispanic peoples have often risked loss of family, livelihood, or even life itself in conversion to Protestantism. Forced acquiescence to the practice of infant baptism may be perceived as submission to an authoritarian religious system that has buttressed the unjust autocracies and oppressive dictatorships. Once again, sensitivity is required, since for these Covenanters, conversion and believer baptism have become a symbol of religious, social, and political emancipation. For some of these pastors this policy may be experienced as an act of personal and religious disempowerment.

For some persons, the Covenant's practice is both too demanding and too ambiguous. Whatever its complexity, the Covenant has chosen to place the doctrines of the new birth and the church above the doctrine of the sacraments. While we continue to pursue the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, the Covenant has chosen this pathway with regard to Christian baptism to ensure that full Christian freedom may be practiced throughout the church.

Within this context the Covenant has steadfastly worked to maintain the unity of the church by practicing both the baptism of infants or the dedication of infants later ratified personally in believer's baptism. By the word of the gospel, the Covenant has called people to be "born anew to a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (I Peter 1). Baptism bears witness to, proclaims, and is a sign of this work of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. This does not compromise the call to persons to repent of sin and believe the gospel by which people are transformed by the same grace into the image and likeness of God's son, Jesus Christ.

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