

Baptism: A Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace

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“Such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart to the other,” said Dupin, “escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious”.¹ Some things, in fact, are too big to be seen. The case of God’s covenant with sinners well illustrates this paradoxical truism. The covenant is the comprehensive soteriological idea of the Bible. It is the presupposition, sometimes explicit, always implicit, of everything that is taught from Genesis to Revelation concerning redemption and religion, church and sacraments, and the meaning and goal of history. It integrates these doctrines into a single unified structure, sets them in their true mutual relations and enables the theologian to view them from a proper theocentric standpoint. It is thus the key to Biblical theology. Since the Apostolic age, however, theologians have generally overlooked it. Only within Reformed Christendom has its centrality received adequate recognition, and there not universally. The Church of England is a Reformed Church; but its seventeenth century leaders deliberately cut themselves off from the broad stream of Reformed thought, and as a result “covenant theology” is scarcely known today within the Anglican communion, even among evangelicals. Perkins, Preston, Sibbes and Bishop Downname, the pioneer Anglican covenant theologians, are forgotten; More and Cross² do not even mention them. Usher’s Irish Articles and the Westminster Confession, the most explicitly covenantal of all the Reformed creeds, were drawn up by theologians of the Church of England to amplify and make explicit the teaching of the Thirty-nine Articles,³ but they have never been treated as part of the Anglican heritage. Among modern evangelicals, Bishop Moule stands almost alone in giving prominence to the covenant idea.⁴ The seventeenth century recoil from the Augustinianism of the Reformers on to the semi-Pelagian slippery slope has led to great theological impoverishment. The doctrines of the Church, the Sacraments and the work of the Holy Spirit, have suffered most; and the lost key to their meaning will not be recovered until covenant theology comes into its own in the Church of England. The following article is an essay in the kind of reconstructive work which the writer believes to be urgently needed. It is an attempt to expound the main features of the doctrine of Christian Baptism in the light of the covenant idea.

I

THE COVENANT OF GRACE

We shall here briefly examine three topics: (i) the nature of the covenant relationship between God and sinners; (ii) the unity and continuity of God’s covenant under its successive editions; (iii) the place of children in that covenant.

(i) In the Ancient Near East, any personal bond entered upon by mutual agreement constituted a covenant. The Bible refers to covenants between individuals (1 Sam. xviii. 3), husband and wife (Mal. ii. 14), tribes (Ex. xxiii. 32), kings (1 Kings xx. 34), king and people (2 Kings xi. 4). Such engagements were normally sealed by a token act in which both parties joined, such as an exchange of gifts (Gen. xxi. 27), a handshake (Ezk. xvii. 18), a meal together (Gen. xxvi. 27 f.) or eating salt (Num. xviii. 19, 2 Chr. xiii. 5). The essence of the covenant was the relationship which it inaugurated rather than the obligations, if any, that

were specified at the time of its making. Covenant obligations were derivative; what was fundamental was the covenant relationship itself. For this reason the word “contract”, which in ordinary speech means simply the acceptance of specific and limited obligations towards each other by parties not otherwise related, does not adequately represent the Biblical idea. In the Bible, covenant obligations are limited only by the character of the covenant relation; within that relation they are unlimited. Buber usefully distinguishes a covenant between equals, which he terms “a covenant of brotherhood” from a covenant between unequal parties, such as that which David imposed on the northern tribes (2 Sam. v. 3). Of such a covenant, he writes: “the relation of overlordship and service, into which the two parties enter, is the decisive factor. . . . I classify this kind of *berith* as the Royal Covenant. It is this kind which YHWH makes with Israel”.⁵

God sums up the terms of His covenant in the words: “*I will be your God, and you shall be my people*”. This covenant “slogan” is the comprehensive promise which comprises all particular promises; it is related to them as a pantechicon [Ed: a large moving van] to all that is packed inside it.⁶ In these words the covenant was promulgated to Abraham and his seed (Gen. xvii. 8-9) and reaffirmed to Moses (Ex. vi. 7), and to Israel through Moses (Ex. xxix. 45, cf. xix. 3-6; Lev. xxvi. 12), at the time of the Exodus. They were quoted by Jeremiah as expressing the core of the Sinaitic covenant (Jer. vii. 23, cf. Hos. i. 9 f., 2. 23); and also as epitomizing the new covenant to which he looked forward, which was to consist in, not a new relation between the people and God, but a more perfect realization of the old one (Jer. xxiv. 7, xxxi. 1. 33, xxxii. 38; so too Ezk. xi. 20, xiv. 11, xxxvi. 28, xxxvii. 23, 27, and Zch. viii. 8, cf. xiii. 9). The New Testament proclaims the fulfilment of Jeremiah’s prophecy in the Christian Church (Heb. viii. 10, cf. 2 Cor. vi. 16), and looks forward to the final realization of covenant eschatology, and hereby the consummation of the covenant relationship, in the world to come. “I saw a new heaven and a new earth. . . . And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem. . . . And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God” (Rev. xxi. 1-3, quoting Ezk. xxxvii. 27 and Lev. xxvi. 11, 12).

From these passages the character of the relationship becomes clear. Grace and promise on God’s side, and faith and hope on man’s side, are its keynotes. God inaugurates it by confronting sinners with the announcement that they shall be His and He will be theirs. By designating Himself *their God*, He invites them to enter into union and communion with Himself, assures them that their sins shall be forgiven and forgotten, and promises freely to bestow upon them all that He has to give—in a word, to give them Himself, as a bridegroom gives himself to his bride. By calling them *His people*, He binds them to unconditional and unlimited obedience. His covenant word, “I will, and you shall,” requires a twofold response: faith, which embraces the covenant and expresses itself in trustful obedience, and hope, which longs and lives for the promised unfolding of the covenant relationship in this world and beyond.

The Bible knows no other basis for religion than God’s covenant. Sinners have no natural claim on God’s mercy by virtue of being men, as the older Arminians taught; they may not presume on the universal Fatherhood of God, as modern Arminians have supposed; they have no warrant whatsoever for saying “my God” until God has first said to them “My people”. The gospel promises, which the Church is under orders to proclaim to the world, are to be understood as *covenant* promises, through which God in Christ summons those who before

were not a people to become “His people” (Rom. ix. 25, 1 Pet. ii. 10, both quoting Hos. ii. 23) and offers Himself to them as “their God”.

(ii) What has been said has already shown that God’s covenant is substantially the same today as when it was first revealed to Abraham. Since Christ’s coming its implications for blessing have been more clearly known and more of its blessings have become available here and now, but this has in no way affected the character of the relationship itself. Article VII explicitly safeguards this point against Anabaptist denial: “The Old Testament is not contrary to the New; for in both the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ. . . . Wherefore they are not to be heard, which feign that the Fathers did look only for transitory promises. . . .” The new Marcionism here condemned is still taught by “dispensationalists” and during the past century has been widely accepted; but the Bible is emphatic that God has never made more than one covenant with fallen man. Two passages out of many must suffice for proof of this: (1) In Gal. iii, Paul takes for granted (i) that God has only ever made one covenant of blessing with sinners: namely, that made with Abraham and his seed; (ii) that the only way of securing blessings from Him is to be one of Abraham’s seed and so a legatee under this covenant (v. 7-9, 29); and (iii) that this covenant conveys, not primarily material benefits (which are not even mentioned in the context) but the spiritual privileges of a present acceptance and family relationship with God (justification and adoption, vv. 8, 26), and a consequent title to the inheritance laid up for God’s people (v. 29, iv. 7). On this basis he argues to show that the Mosaic law, so far from annulling the covenant promises (v. 17-18) or opening an alternative way of salvation apart from them (v. 21), was promulgated for the sole purpose of impelling sinners to faith in them (vv. 22-24); and that Gentiles become Abraham’s seed and beneficiaries under the covenant, not by practising works of law, but by following Abraham’s faith (v. 6-14, 26-29). (2) The Epistle to the Hebrews takes it for granted that from the dawn of history till now God’s covenant has always been the same thing: a summons to trustful, obedient fellowship with God in this world together with a promise of reward in “a better country, that is an heavenly” at the end of this pilgrimage. The whole eleventh chapter shows this, as does the assertion that the oath with which God confirmed His promise to Abraham was intended to strengthen not merely Abraham’s faith but also that of Christian believers, who are heirs of the same promise (vi. 13-18). In chapters vii-x, the writer contrasts the two systems that God has revealed for the implementing of that part of the covenant promise which concerned communion with Him on earth: the Mosaic, which bore from the outset the marks of its own imperfection and provisional character, and the Christian, which has now replaced it. We must not be misled by the fact that he speaks of two “covenants”, the first and the second, the old and the new: this is simply a reflection of Old Testament usage, in which the word “covenant” acquired an institutional significance and became “the formula designating the entire structure and content of the religion of Israel”.⁷ The two “covenants” are two successive systems, the first typifying the second, for the realization of the selfsame covenant privilege—present fellowship between God’s people and himself. So far from throwing doubt on the unity and continuity of the covenant promise, the contrast thus presupposes and confirms it.⁸

(iii) God entailed His covenant upon Abraham *and his seed* (Gen. xvii, 7-8), and accordingly required the circumcision of all his male descendants at the first convenient moment (i.e., when eight days old) as “a token of the covenant” (v. 11) between Himself and them. The covenant thus confirmed the solidarity of the family, making it a spiritual as well as a social and economic unit. Abraham’s descendants were henceforth born into a covenant relation with God, and were by virtue of their parentage heirs of the promises pertaining to that relation. They could repudiate the covenant at age by unbelief, and forfeit their inheritance by

refusing to claim it; but until they thus “contracted out” and renounced their hereditary rights, God was and would remain “their God”.

Abraham, his son, and his male retainers, were all marked with the covenant sign, as a token of their reception into covenant status (vv. 23-27). Thus they became the foundation members of a community which has continued from that day to this without a break—the *visible Church*, the fellowship which professes to embrace and live under God’s covenant.

When on the day of Pentecost Peter announced that the long-awaited Messianic kingdom and outpouring of the Spirit had at last begun, he took pains to make it clear that the status of children in the covenant had not been in any way affected by the dawning of the New Age. “The promise (sc., of a complete and final remission of all sins and the present gift of the Spirit) is to you, *and to your children*” (Acts ii. 39). The blessings of the New Age, like every other good thing which the covenant relationship involved, would belong by hereditary right to the children of those who by faith received these gifts for themselves. Similarly, in 1 Cor. vii. 14 Paul assured his Gentile readers that the “birth-privilege” of Abraham’s lineal seed was now extended to their own children. The fact that one of his parents was a Christian constituted a child “holy” (*hagios*): that is to say, if one parent was *hagios*, i.e. related to God in covenant (the word implies this), the child was born into that same status. “Since the wall of partition is broken down, the same covenant of salvation which was made with Abraham and his posterity is communicated to us” (Calvin, *ad loc.*). We conclude, then, that the covenant status and privilege of believers’ children has been unaffected by the transition from the Mosaic to the Christian era.

We have not exhausted the doctrine of the covenant. We have not even mentioned its objective basis in God’s election and Christ’s mediatorial ministry, nor the Holy Spirit’s work in conveying its benefits to the individual with and by the Word; we have only hinted at the doctrine of the Church, the covenant community, and we have by no means fully defined the relation between the “Old” and “New” covenants. But we have said enough to lay the foundation for a study of the initiatory sacraments of the covenant, and to these we now turn.

II BAPTISM

We saw that in Old Testament times covenants between man and man were normally ratified by a symbolic action in which both parties joined. God’s covenant with Abraham and his seed was sealed in the same way, by the rite of circumcision. The covenant sign was changed to baptism when the Mosaic economy gave way to the Christian (cf. Mat. xxviii. 19). Accordingly, the New Testament, while attributing to both signs the same significance, treats circumcision as the sign of a bygone economy, to which Christians may not return. Circumcision marked the pre-Christian era of waiting and hoping; baptism proclaims the fulfilment of Old Testament hopes in the coming of Christ, and by its symbolism bears witness to the objective ground of the bestowal of all covenant blessings, now for the first time made known: namely, union with Christ in the death and resurrection to which His own representative baptism in Jordan had testified and committed Him.

The Bible accords to each of these rites, as administered to adults, a threefold significance:

(i) They assure the believer of his covenant status and hope. God instituted circumcision as “a token of the covenant” between Himself and Abraham (Gen. xvii. 11). Paul merely interprets this statement when he calls the rite “a sign and seal of the righteousness which he had by faith” (Rom. iv. 11, R.S.V.); for justification, which to Paul meant both non-imputation of sins (v. 7-8) and acceptance by God as a son and heir (Gal. iii. 24-26), is the first and fundamental covenant blessing and the pledge of all the rest (cf. Rom. v. 9-10). Similarly, Paul appeals to baptism as a God-given proof of the covenant status of Gentile believers. To a church inclined to suppose that covenant status could only be gained by circumcision, he wrote: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (i.e., baptism sealed and declared your union with Him) . . . and if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed (sc., in Him), and heirs according to the (covenant) promise” (Gal. iii. 26-29). Because both signs assure the believer that God is in very truth “his God”, the mere possession of them has always tempted hypocrites to suppose that He must be “their God” too. We find Paul exploding such groundless optimism, however, with reference both to circumcision (Rom. ii. 25-29) and to baptism (1 Cor. x. 1 ff.).

(ii) They visibly represent to the recipients the blessings, obligations and character of the covenant which they seal. Both witness to the remission of sins and *justification* (cf. Rom. iv. 11; Acts ii. 38, xxii. 16). Both, again, signify *regeneration*. Circumcision is taken in the Old Testament to represent God’s gracious work of renewing and purifying the heart (Deut. xxx. 6). This, Paul affirms (Col. ii. 11-12) is the “circumcision made without hands”, “the circumcision of Christ,” which God effects by uniting believers to Christ in His death and resurrection: a union which baptism symbolizes. Again, the symbolism of each sign summons its recipients to a new life of holiness. Circumcision told the Jew that he must purify his heart (Deut. x. 16, Jer. iv. 4); baptism tells the Christian that he must die to sin and rise to righteousness (Rom. vi. 1-13). Moreover, both are eschatological symbols, sealing God’s covenant promise (cf. Ezk. xxxvi. 26-28) that He will work in His people the new obedience to which He binds them (Deut. xxx. 6, Rom. vi. 5); thus the symbols oblige and encourage their recipients to hope in God for *sanctification* and *glorification*. Finally, we must note that the manner of their administration bears witness to the gracious character of the covenant. As in its conclusion it is God who acts, confronting the sinner with His word of promise and command for acceptance or rejection, so in its sealing the candidate is passive, merely accepting what his Creator imposes, while God acts through the officiant to mark him out as His own. Nobody in the Bible baptizes or circumcises himself. Both sacraments thus proclaim the gracious initiative of God.

(iii) As ceremonies of initiation, they admit to membership of the visible covenant community, to which one may not belong without them. In Gen. xvii. 14, God enacts that “the uncircumcised man, child . . . shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant”. Accordingly, we find that when the covenant sign was changed converts were received into the visible Church by baptism immediately upon their professing faith (Acts ii. 41, xvi. 33, etc.). The New Testament nowhere suggests any relaxation of God’s categorical demand that all Church members should be marked with the covenant sign.

Two corollaries may be briefly drawn from what has been said.

(1) The ground and necessity of baptizing the infants of Christian parents now becomes clear. The *ground* of the practice is the fact that from the moment of birth these children share their parents’ covenant status. The covenant sign, therefore, has the same significance when administered to them as it has for adult converts: it does not create, but confirms and attests a

status and relationship which is already theirs on other grounds. The adult enjoys it by reason of his own faith; the Christian's child, by reason of his parentage. The child possesses the thing signified; he has, therefore, a right to the sign which confirms him in possession of it. The necessity of the practice derives from the fact that when God announced the covenant of grace to Abraham he commanded that all his male descendants, as members of the covenant, should be marked with the covenant sign in infancy and thus be formally admitted to junior membership of the Church. As we saw, the New Testament teaches that the covenant sign has since been altered, the sphere of the covenant extended to cover the whole Gentile world, and the blessings of the Church on earth increased; but it nowhere suggests that God has changed the rule which He originally laid down concerning infant Church membership. If ever there was a speaking silence, it is the silence of the New Testament at this point. It can mean only one thing: that the *status quo ante* remains. The proof-text for the baptism of Christians' children is thus Gen. xvii. 10: "This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee: Every man, child among you shall be circumcised". Since God spoke these words to Abraham, baptism has replaced circumcision as the covenant sign and the distinction between male and female has ceased to be relevant to the possession and sealing of covenant status;⁹ the command therefore to the Christian Church now reads: "Every infant among you shall be baptized". Infant baptism is thus the will of God. It is not merely legitimate; it is obligatory. Christians' children are to be enrolled as junior Church members by means of the regular ceremony of admission. There is nothing in the Bible more certain than this. There is no Scriptural warrant *at all* for infant baptism if the continuity of the covenant be denied; but, once it is admitted, infant baptism is so unassailably established as to make further argument superfluous.

(2) It is now clear also what conception should be formed of the *efficacy* and *use* of baptism. Baptism is the word of the covenant made visible and seeking admission to the mind through eye-gate, and it is a means of grace, as is the word preached and heard, because it is a means to *faith*. God designed and uses it to confirm faith in those who have it and to awaken faith in those baptized as infants (cf. Art. XXV). In the latter case, of course, the intended effect is conditional upon the meaning of the sacrament being explained to the child. "Faith cometh by hearing"; and a sacrament that is never explained is of necessity inefficacious. Rightly understood, however, baptism has a lifelong efficacy and use, as an assurance and an incentive. "As often as we fall," wrote Calvin, "we should recall our baptism, and thereby fortify our mind, so that it may be sure and certain of the remission of our sins" (*Inst.* IV. xv. 3). And the thought of the promises and obligations which baptism sealed as his should constantly spur the Christian to faith, obedience, hope and love. We may conclude by quoting further from Calvin's masterly exposition of the right use and true benefit of this covenant sacrament: "We should receive it as from the hand of its author," he writes: "we ought to be firmly convinced that it is he himself who speaks to us through the sign; he who washes and cleanses us, and puts out of mind our failings; he who makes us partakers of his death, destroys the kingdom of Satan and breaks the power of sin; he who, moreover, makes us one with himself, so that, clothed with him, we are accounted children of God. We should be as certain, I say, that he brings these benefits to our souls, as we are that we see our bodies washed, immersed, and surrounded by water . . . it is a most certain rule concerning sacraments, that in the material objects we should discern spiritual benefits, just as if they were actually set before our eyes. . . . Not that these gracious gifts are so bound up with and tied to the sacrament as to be conferred upon us by its own efficacy; the fact is simply that by this token the Lord declares to us that it is his will and pleasure to bestow them all upon us. Nor is it with an empty spectacle that he feeds our gaze; but he leads us to the actual object signified, and effectively fulfils in us that which he represents before us" (*Inst.* IV. xv. 14).

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Endnotes:

- 1) E. A. Poe, *The Purloined Letter*.
- 2) *Anglicanism: the thought and practice of the Church of England, illustrated from the religious literature of the seventeenth century*.
- 3) It is a simple matter of fact that all the English clergymen who sat in the Westminster Assembly were episcopally ordained; most were incumbents at the time; and some conformed in 1662. On their theological ideals, cf. P. Schaff, *History of the Creeds*, p. 761: “(the Westminster Confession) kept in the track of the English Articles of religion, which the Assembly was at first directed to revise, and with which it was essentially agreed. It wished to carry on that line of development which was begun . . . by the framers of the Lambeth Articles (1595), and which was continued by Archbishop Usher in the Irish Articles (1615). It was a Calvinistic completion and sharper logical statement of the doctrinal system of the Thirty-nine Articles.
- 4) cf. *Outlines of Christian Doctrine* (1889). pp. 40 f., 102, and, Girdlestone-Moule-Drury, *English Church Teaching* (1897), pp. 55 ff. “If we would get a right view of Christian life and worship, we need a right view of the COVENANTS” (p. 55).
- 5) M. Buber, *Moses*, p. 103.
- 6) Cf. Richard Sibbes’ comment: “there is no phrase in Scripture, that hath so much in so little as this. . . . All other particular promises in the covenant of grace are members of this. . . . This is the first and fundamental promise . . . the life and soul of all the promises . . .” (*Works*, ed. Grosart, vi. 8). And Calvin: “These words the prophets habitually expound as comprehending both life, and salvation, and the whole sum of blessedness . . . again and again the prophets proclaim that nothing further is needed to bring us the wealth of all blessings and assurance of salvation, if only the Lord is a God to us (*Inst.* II. x. 8).
- 7) G. Vos, in Hastings’ *DCG*, 1. 373, col. 2.
- 8) Limitations of space preclude any treatment of the passages in which Paul opposes the Mosaic law to the gospel, describing it as a covenant of works which brings bondage and death (cf. Gal. iv. 21 ff., 2 Cor. iii, etc.). It must suffice to say that these passages are arguments *ad hominem*, in which he accepts *pro tempore* the evaluation of the Law as a self-sufficient covenant of life which Judaism by its rejection of Christ had given it, and devotes himself simply to proving that those who treat it as such will find that it leads to death, for they will in fact break it and thus incur its curse. The ease with which he slips into this line of thought reflects his years of controversy in Jewish synagogues. We have already seen that in his own view the Law was not given to be a covenant of life at all.
- 9) In the Old Testament Church, women were counted as partakers of the covenant, and so as circumcised, by virtue of their marital or blood relationship to male covenant members. This appears from the fact that women ate the Passover, which no uncircumcised person shall eat (Ex. xii. 48); and that the circumcising of all the males is spoken of as the circumcising of “all the people” (Josh. v. 5-8). But in the New Testament women are baptized on their own profession of faith just as men are (Acts xvi. 15). Cf. Gal. iii. 28.